10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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by M. HOWARD LANE

TWO NOVELETTES

GUNMEN PAY IN BLOOD
by HARRY F. OLMSTED

KANSAS LAW FOR TEXAS DROVERS
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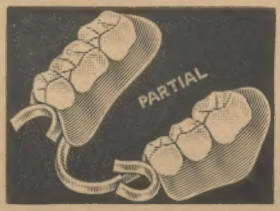

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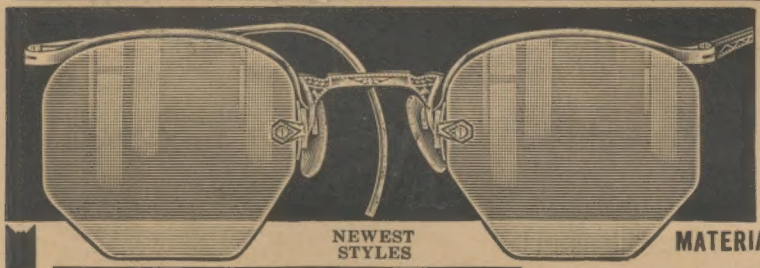

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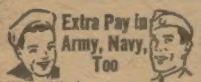

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE MAY 8TH

VOLUME XVIII MAY, 1942 NUMBER 2

1—Complete Novel—1

REBELLION AT CAVALRY CREEK . . . . . **M. Howard Lane** 11

Why did Ben Tampa fight on, sick and alone, for the freedom of a pioneer's valley, when any one of the friends he battled for—would sell their birthright and his life for five hundred Judas dollars?

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GUNMEN PAY IN BLOOD . . . . . **Harry F. Olmsted** 82

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THE HERO WHO COULDN'T QUIT . . . . . **Jack Bloodhart** 74

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Western Feature

WEST—FOR THE SPICE OF LIFE! . . . . . **The Editor** 6

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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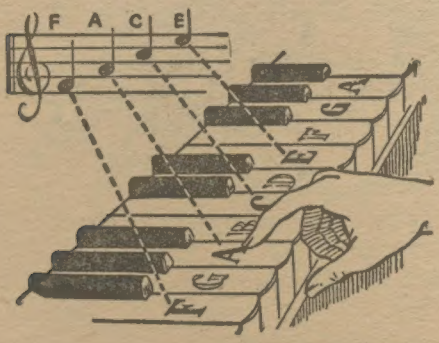

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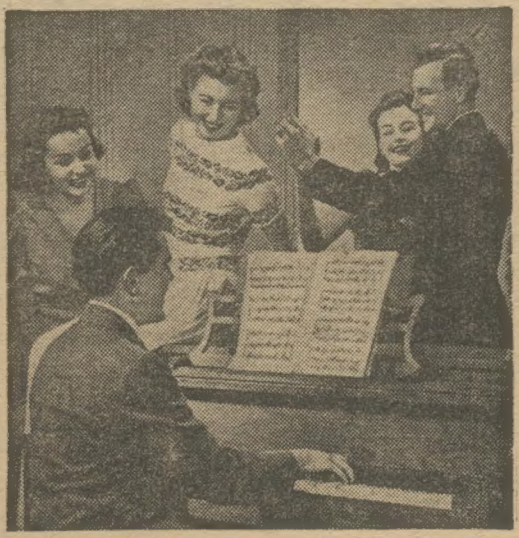

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WEST—FOR THE SPICE OF LIFE!

THE West, like Rome, wasn't built in a day—and its thrilling, many-sided story can't be told in one issue of a magazine. Nor in a dozen. It is something like a massive cut diamond that catches and reflects the glittering pinpoints of a million tiny campfires. Each sparkling facet is one life, one ringing deed in the epic of the frontier's history—and each one has its place in the whole.

The great and various story of the West is the dramatic record of its men and women, every one different from every other. They weren't all sheriffs or badmen, not by a long shot. They weren't all villains or heroes, the movie script writers notwithstanding. They were human beings, with human virtues and human failings.

In *10 Story Western* we try to keep our editorial eye on the well-rounded, complete picture. If any of our authors show a tendency to think—and write—in terms of stereotype bang-bang action between gun-dummies, we give them a nudge. What we want is variety—the high degree of variety that can be found among adventurous men and women on any frontier—and they know it.

The lead novel in this issue is a tale, based on fact, about a privately-owned trail belonging to a community of pioneer homesteaders. In more than a decade of editing Western magazines, we had never run across a story dealing with this particular topic, until M. Howard Lane sent us "Rebellion at Cavalry Creek." We welcome him to *10 Story's* feature position, with a pat on the back for his enterprise in digging up this little-known story setting. It's right down our alley.

Other stories in this issue follow the action trails of: a Texas cattleman at Kansas' gun-guarded deadline, a peace-loving youngster whom Destiny had marked for an outlaw's career of violence and death, a crusading editor, a feudist, a wagon-train scout, a drifting Ranger, and many others. Variety? That's what we do our doggonedest to give.

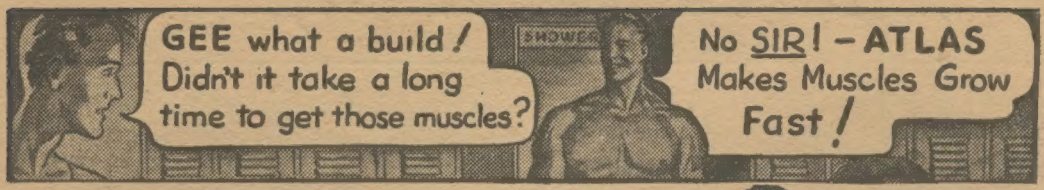
Next month we are going to print a novelette laid in a locale that seldom finds its way into Western magazines. It's a thousand miles from the "another-Indian-bit-the-dust" type of story. Yet it is part and parcel of the West, and therefore belongs between our covers. The author is our good friend, M. Howard Lane, who's been busy doing some more digging.

Here is a picture of the setting, in the author's words:

> Men with a lick of sense in their heads didn't belong on Boat Row, day or night, Brent reflected gloomily, as his long strides carried him nearer the waterfront. For a stretch of a mile or more along the bayshore, he could see rotting hulks that had found their last resting place. Sailors jumping ship to head for the gold fields had caused abandonment of the vessels. The high price of lumber had lured captains to beach and dismantle their crafts, and the scarcity of housing had converted more of the abandoned brigs and barkentines into seaside hotels, grog shops, gambling houses and brothels. Here congregated the men who followed the sea, from captain to cabin boy. Here, along this strip of the Embarcardero, a thirsty man might take one drink, and wake to find himself beyond the Farallones, or coasting outside Monterey Bay.

Some of you may recognize it as the San Francisco waterfront of the wild gold-rush days. Brent was a Yankee—an honest, God-fearing man, by the standards of that day and place—and he was on the hunt for his missing partner, Jack Bailey. He had a cruelly gnawing fear that Jack might have been shanghaied,

(Concluded on page 8)



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I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

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(Continued from page 6)

and as he worked his way down the ugly line of floating grog shops, with a question here and a bribe there, his fear grew to dread certainty. Aboard the gambling ship *Apollo,* at a bar where he was surrounded by a dozen tough blackguards of the sea, he even learned the name and destination of the boat that Jack had been shipped aboard.

Again we quote from Lane's story:

He had heard enough. Brent turned from the bar, leaving his drink untouched.

Sudden hope that he might yet be able to save his partner had killed his own sense of personal danger. It was not until he swung completely around and saw the heavy-bodied pair of sailors closing in on him that he realized his oversight.

One of the men had a short, bright blade clutched in one hand, the other needed nothing more than the ape-like grasp of his arms to subdue any man.

"You'll make a 'andy seaman, my bucko," the one with the knife was growling. "We know a captain who'll pay five quid for men able-bodied as you."

"Or you," Brent said, and he felt the tightness of fear for Jack that had clamped him all morning give way. Suddenly smiling, he back-stepped a pace, and his sweeping hand touched first his unemptied glass, then the neck of a rum bottle. He brought the glass around, hurling the liquor into the face of the dirk-armed sailor.

The man's howl smashed through the steady clamor of the *Apollo.* Together the two ruffians came rushing in on Brent, and he sensed that they were ready to kill him now. His fingers slipped on the neck of the bottle, as the boring weight of the man with the ape-like arms caught him full in the chest.

Brent lifted his knee and caught the sailor in the groin. It brought a groan from the man, and his short-cropped head bobbed forward. Brent felt the sting of the dirk through his coat and shirt, as it grazed his arm. Then he had the rum bottle solidly in his hand. He brought it around in a sweep that cracked the glass against the ape-like sailor's head. He finished its swing by smashing it into the side of the dirk-armed killer's jaw. Both of the men went down, rum darkening their clothes.

Brent stood over them, the neck of the broken bottle still in his hand.

This roistering, violent 'Frisco waterfront is one more facet of the many-sided diamond that is the West. It is as much a part of the picture as a Tom Roan novel of Old West cattle-drovers, which will head next month's lineup. To the groan and creaking of hoisting anchors, or to the thunder of a thousand longhorns in stampede, the men who tamed the wild, raw frontier of the American West will play out their strings—in June *10 Story Western!*

THE EDITOR.

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A swift action-novel of Montana fighting men

By M. HOWARD LANE

Against war-painted Sioux and famine harvests, that little back-to-the wall colony of Montana homesteaders had clung to the banks of Cavalry Creek. Yet now, for a gun-backed land-grabber's blood-stained dollars, they were ready to sell the colony's last thin lifeline—unless Ben Tampa, half dead with the fever, could buy back their birthright with a beltful of borrowed six-shooter shells!

CHAPTER ONE

Make Way for a Cattle King

BEN TAMPA lay in a big four-poster and cursed the old clock hanging on the opposite wall of his bedroom. There had been hours during the last few days when he had been convinced that time had stopped passing. But when the fever had mounted too high and he had cursed the clock, old Limpy Parks, the only farm hand he could afford, would come limping in to keep him company.

"You been a right sick jigger, Ben," Limpy had warned. "Ol' Doc Chester in Liberty tole me to keep you quiet until you get some strength back in your bones. The danged grippe is funny stuff. You cain't fool with it. Not a feller with all you got to live for."

"And what have I got to live for that's so particular danged important?"

"Why lots of things." Limpy Parks had talked more like his dead father than a farm hand. "Lots of things, Ben. You got a right nice farm here along Cavalry Creek. Leastways, your daddy thought it was, and he was right proud to leave it to you."

"There ain't a one of us on Cavalry

Creek makin' enough money to buy lead for our guns," Ben had told the old-timer bitterly. "I can't even pay your wages, or our grub bill. Neither can any of the rest. What the hell good does it do to raise crops that cost more to haul to market than they're worth?"

"A day will come when they'll run one of them new-fangled railroads through this country and then we'll all make money," Limp had said. "They got that thar Union Pacific and Central Pacific tied together. An' if that outfit starts coinin' money, you mark my word, some smart hombres will git the notion of runnin' a line to tap this here Montany country."

But that was just the faded dream of an eternal optimist. However, it didn't matter. Ben knew that he'd keep plowing and seeding and harrowing, because it was in his blood. He'd keep the Tampa name proud. His dad had blazed the Tampa Trail into this winding, grassy valley watered by Cavalry Creek. The emigrants who had followed him had fought Sioux and Cheyenne for possession. Now they didn't have Indians to battle, but sometimes a man was forced to think that redskins would be preferable to Link Shotwell.

Ben's voice held the hard edge of a file. "You've

Shotwell had trailed a big Texas herd into this country. He'd had the money to buy plenty of graze, and what he couldn't buy his men had homesteaded for him under fictitious names. Now Shotwell's Linked S cattle roamed a good share of the range about Liberty town.

Liberty. Thought of the name brought a wry chuckle to Ben Tampa's lips. There wasn't much liberty in the town, now, for any but Linked S cowhands. Shotwell had got himself elected to the Board of Super-

rodded this country long enough, Shotwell. It's time decent men had a look-in."

visors, and named chairman. He'd got behind handsome young Spade Cutter at the last election, and Cutter had been elected sheriff. So now if a Cavalry Creek farm hand had got beat up in Liberty it didn't help very much to complain to the sheriff.

There was just one good thing Link Shotwell had accomplished since he'd been elected Supervisor, Ben reflected as he lay there waiting for Limpy Parks to get back from town with their week's supply of groceries. Shotwell had recently built them a new road into Cavalry Creek. It was a more direct route to Liberty than the old Tampa Trail that Ben's father had blazed into Freedom Valley. And it was better cared for, because it belonged to the county.

The Tampa Trail didn't. It followed the course of the creek, and each homesteader held title to the section which passed through his farm. Thus in reality it was a private road, though the public had used it since the country had been opened to settlement, and the county, recognizing this fact, had occasionally run a grader the length of it.

But now, with the new Sioux Road completed, the old Tampa Trail would get little use. The thought brought Ben a moment of regret. People riding that old pioneer trail had always kept his father's memory alive. Now it would fade, as the Pony Express had faded before the swift advance of rails.

A horse was trotting into the yard outside the Tampa farmhouse. The ring of its hoofs came clearly through the open window behind the bed where the young Cavalry Creek farmer lay.

Ben twisted toward the closed door of the bedroom. A lean, hard-muscled man, he looked almost small in the big four-poster his mother had brought by Conestoga wagon from the head of navigation on the Missouri. His dark face was thinned by the ravages of the disease he had been fighting for days. But the thinness and the lines fever had put in his skin could not destroy the hard stubbornness of Ben Tampa's jaw and lips, nor the clear gray of his eyes, which contrasted oddly with the unruly black wildness of his hair.

Lying there, Ben heard the living room door open and a rider stamp inside. He could even hear the music of the man's spur chains on the floor, and the sound puckered his brow. Limpy, if he remembered right, hadn't worn spurs on his ride to town.

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THE bedroom door pushed inward with unceremonious abruptness, and the man who stood framed in the opening wasn't Limpy Parks.

"Shotwell!" Ben said.

"Surprised you, eh?" Link Shotwell grinned. He stood there, confident, poised, wide shoulders cased in a dark serge coat almost filling the doorway. Slanted across his sturdy thighs was a gunbelt, studded with shells that looked bright enough to have been polished. He hooked his thumbs in the belt, and he looked like just what he was—the one wealthy man in a country ruled by Poverty's bony hand.

Ben felt the long muscles between his shoulders tense. Link Shotwell hadn't come here to pass the time of day. Ben's head was buzzing with weakness, but he managed to throw back the covers and swing to the edge of the bed.

"I was expecting Limpy," he said experimentally.

A smile that showed Link Shotwell's expensive gold-capped teeth crossed the full lips of the Liberty range boss. "Why, Tampa," he murmured, "that's one of the reasons I called. Your hand, Parks, had a little mix-up with my *segundo,* Slant Barnes. He came off kind of second best. Got a few teeth splattered out of his mouth, and a crease along the side of the haid. Doc Chester's patchin' him up. 'Course it was all Parks' fault. He got likkered—"

"He didn't have the price of a glass of beer when he went to town," Ben said flatly.

He ducked his head while he pulled on his boots, so that Shotwell couldn't see the hot anger twisting his face. The cattleman hadn't ridden five miles from Liberty just to give him this news. Shotwell had come for some other reason, and Ben wanted to learn it. He stamped into his boots and pulled on a pair of wrinkled corduroys, and slipped a gray shirt over his head. He ran a comb through his un-

ruly hair. When he turned to face the big rancher, Ben's face was composed.

"What else brought you to Cavalry Creek?" he asked bluntly.

Shotwell chuckled. He slipped a broad, blunt-fingered hand inside his coat. "You always were one to come to the point," he drawled. "Well, I'm another." His hand came forth, filled with a legal looking document.

Ben eyed it curiously.

"This here is a petition," Shotwell explained, "which I'm hopin' you'll see fit to sign. Fact is, I'll make it worth your while to sign it."

Ben sat down on the edge of the bed. He was weaker than he figured, but his head at least was clear. "What's this petition all about?" he asked.

Shotwell waved the paper negligently. "The Tampa Trail," he said smoothly. "I've done learned that, though a hunk of it belongs to each of you, it's been used so long as a public road that it'll have to be kept open until all you property owners petition the Supervisors to close it. Natcherly, with that new Sioux Road across the hills finished, you ain't going to be using the Trail no more—"

"Close the Tampa Trail?" Ben said slowly. It was the thing he had been thinking about just before the cattleman had arrived. "Dunno as I rightly see why we should do that. My dad—"

"Your dad opened it," Shotwell cut him short. "So natcherly you feel kinda sentimental about the old road. I can understand that. But sometimes you cain't let sentiment interfere with business."

"Business?" Ben was suddenly alert.

Shotwell nodded. "Yep," he said smoothly. "Business. I'll lay one hundred in silver on the line for your signature."

Ben kept his thin face calm, while an alarm bell rang in his mind. "Why is my name worth a hundred dollars of your money?" he asked quietly.

Shotwell gave the man on the bed his most engaging, gold-toothed smile. "Why, Tampa," he drawled, "it don't take no mental giant to answer that. Your the kingpin of all Cavalry Creek. They's six ranches along here besides yours. Your dad brung them pioneers in here and he rodded 'em until pneumonia laid him low a year ago. Command kinda passed right down to his son. You swing a big loop along this creek. If I can show the rest of your sodbuster friends your name at the top of the list, they'll sign easy."

There was quite a lot of truth in what the cattleman said. Ben knew that. His word was worth something along Cavalry Creek, even though he was the youngest of the valley farmers.

"I know that," he said slowly. "That's why I got to be careful not to steer folks into a blind poke. You tell me why you want to see the Trail closed, and mebbe I'll sign—but not for a hundred dollars. I need money, but not that bad."

"Fair enough." Link Shotwell lounged against the door case. "You've been frank with me, Tampa, and I'll be the same. Fact is, you sign this petition, and help me line up the rest of your Creek friends, and you'll be doin' 'em a right big favor. Yes sir, you sure will. You see, Tampa, I want to buy your right-of-way. I'll pay five hundred dollars cash to each property owner along the creek for clear title."

"Five hundred dollars!" Ben rolled the words on his tongue. That was more money than he or any of the rest of the hard-pressed farmers on Cavalry Creek had seen in a lump for years. Spread around, such a sum could restore credit that was stretched to the cracking point.

"You really want the Trail all to yourself, don't you, Link?" he said softly. "Might you have had this idea in mind before you pushed through that new Sioux Road?"

A dusky flush was mounting in the cattleman's full face. His dark eyes narrowed dangerously. "I ain't in the habit of tellin' my business around, Tampa," he said.

Ben smiled thinly, and his gray eyes were just as dangerous as Shotwell's. "You'll tell it this time, Shotwell," he said quietly, "or I'll say no dice!"

CHAPTER TWO

Salvation Dollars

TENSELY Ben waited for the cattleman's reply. It was not long in coming.

"You're a hard cuss to deal with, Tam-

pa," Link Shotwell grumbled. "I didn't want this word to get around, but I guess I can't keep it to myself any longer. . . . You see, I'm buying up a lot of land east of the valley here. Got to have more graze for my herds. Didn't want to mention it, because I'm afeard if it comes out that I'm the purchaser, the price will sky-rocket on me." His full lips curved engagingly. "So keep it under your hat, eh, Tampa?"

Ben replied indirectly. "And you want the Tampa Trail right-of-way," he said slowly, "to shuttle your herds back and forth between feed grounds. It's a very good idea."

"That's right!" Shotwell agreed heartily. "Now you see—"

Ben clamped one bony knee with thin, wiry fingers. "All I see," he said flatly, "is that you don't need to own the Tampa Trail to run your cattle over it. You got as much right to the use of it as we have, Shotwell."

The rage in him made Link Shotwell's chest heave suddenly. "Meanin' you ain't interested in my proposition, Tampa?" he shouted. His breath was coming hoarsely and his big fingers were clenched.

The anger in the other made Ben feel cool by contrast. "Meanin' I ain't, Link," he said quietly. "Not until I know your *real* reason for wanting a clean title to the Tampa Trail."

Shotwell's eyes had narrowed until they were glittering dark streaks of savagery. "You damned clodhopper," he said in a voice that was like a growl in his throat, "you'll sign or I'll—"

"Finish what the grippe started!" Ben said. He was coming off the bed in a long dive as the cattleman's palm slid toward his holstered Colt.

Ben's bony right shoulder hit Shotwell in the middle. He grappled with his left hand for possession of the range boss's Colt, and felt his fingers close about a thick wrist as the driving force of his lunge smashed Shotwell backward into the living room.

A heavy oak table graced the center of the floor. The rancher tried desperately to catch his balance as a rug skidded from beneath his feet. With a hoarse yell he went over backward. Ben saw the table across the man's falling shoulders, and he knew what was going to happen. It did. The back of Shotwell's skull cracked solidly against the rim of the table top. Unconscious, he struck the floor in a crumpled heap.

Cold sweat stung the corner of Ben's eyes. He raised a hand that he couldn't keep steady, and wiped his face. Even the back of his shirt was wet with perspiration. Long shivers of weakness were running the length of his legs. One furious minute of battle had done this to him. He realized for the first time that he was really sick.

There was a decanter of treasured whiskey in a corner cupboard. Ben turned to it, and poured himself a long drink. He gulped it down, and the liquor's instant warmth drove the shakiness from his muscles.

He was feeling better when he turned back to look down at the Liberty range-boss. The parable of David and Goliath that he remembered from neighborhood Sunday School days came to him. It brought the tracing of a wry smile to his lips.

"Sometimes it takes little fellers like me and the rest of the folks here along the creek to whittle big gents like you down to size, Link." He spoke the words, but Shotwell couldn't hear them. The man would likely be out cold for a damn long time.

Thoughtfully Ben hunkered down beside the range king. He thumbed a double handful of cartridges from Shotwell's belt and slipped them into his pants pocket. A man was pretty hard up when he had to steal lead. The thought twisted Ben's face into a hard, dark mask of bitterness. He saw a corner of the petition Shotwell had clutched in his left hand protruding from beneath an edge of his coat. Ben picked it up as he straightened. He looked at it for a long time.

Slowly he shredded it, and let the pieces fall like over-size snowflakes. Loss of the petition would send the cattleman back to Liberty, Ben figured. He sure and certain couldn't talk any of the rest of the Cavalry Creek pioneers into signing a petition he couldn't produce.

"Which'll give me time to have a talk with 'em," Ben muttered, "if I can sit a saddle."

"FIVE HUNDRED dollahs, fer a strip of my land forty feet wide and a half mile long? Why blue blazes and red hell, Ben Tampa, you must be looney in the haid tuh ask me to buck such a deal! Ain't makin' me no nevermind why Shotwell wants it. Five hundred dollahs is more hard money than I've had cross my palm in three year an' better! Why, with that ma can have the new cookstove she's been hankerin' for an' the kids can have shoes."

Ben hardly heard old Dane Lansing's happy planning. He was facing the bitter blasting of his own hopes for the fifth time in a row.

He had started at the Gauld place, next on Cavalry Creek above his own, and then had worked north and east, following the green line of the stream through the wide-open loveliness of Freedom Valley. All the farmers had listened to him until he had mentioned the amount of Shotwell's offer. Then they had promptly quit listening and started planning how they would spend the money. Ben could understand their eagerness. He had felt it himself. He knew what it was to be without hope. But he didn't, he realized now, know what it was to have a family depending on you—children needing the barest necessities that couldn't be granted. It was the sight of their faces that almost shook his own resolve.

Dane Lansing's chuckle cut through his thoughts. "Why, dang you, Ben," he laughed, "I git it now. You been having a joke with me!"

Ben drew a deep breath. "Dane," he said flatly, "I don't climb out of bed and make a ride like this to play jokes. You've got to listen to me. You've got to use your head. You know that the right-of-way we own isn't worth five hundred dollars. If we know that, Shotwell knows it too. He ain't aimin' to give us somethin' for nothing. Ain't a cattleman living but hates the guts of our kind. Right today his foreman beat hell out of Limpy, and Shotwell laughs about it. So will his sheriff!"

The common sense of Tampa's speech had a sobering effect on the grizzled old farmer. "You think he's trying to pull a

shindy on us, huh?" Lansing asked doubtfully.

It was the opening Ben had waited for. He drove one fist into the palm of the other hand, and his fever-thinned face hardened with determination and the certainty of his own conclusions. "I know it, Dane! But I can't prove it. Just give me the time to do that. It's all I ask—time to look around a little. If Shotwell is sincere, he won't object to that. He'll buy your right-of-way a week or two weeks from now just as quick as he will tomorrow—if he's telling the truth about wanting it for his cattle. All I'm asking, Dane, is a little time."

He rode away from Lansing's farm with the pioneer's promise to hold off signing anything for a few days. The promise, though, had been given half-heartedly. He had managed to extract the same lukewarm agreement from the rest after arguing with them. Certainly it was not the kind of cooperation he had expected. It made him feel like a man dangling over a precipice, trusting his weight to a frayed rope.

That feeling was still in him an hour later when he rode into the yard of the last farm at this eastern end of Freedom Valley. Beyond the big rambling white house, the silos, barns and corrals, the valley floor began to tip upward toward the high notch of Red Feather Pass in the Bighorns. This place belonged to Carley Morgan, one of the pioneers who had followed Ben Tampa's father to Montana. More prosperous than the rest to start with, his money had made money, and his ranch had prospered. Open-handed and generous, his dollars more than once had helped the rest of the little colony through years of drought and poor prices. Now, Ben knew, Carley was as badly strapped as any of them. The mortgages which he would never foreclose on his friends and neighbors were waste paper in his strong box at the Liberty bank.

Carley's word would carry a lot of weight with the rest of the Cavalry Creek farmers, if he could swing him to his way of thinking, Ben felt. If he couldn't . . . He tightened his lips grimly on the thought.

The sound of his brown mount's hoofs on the hard-pan of the yard brought a figure around the far corner of the house. It was Carley Morgan's daughter, Margaret. Evidently she had been working in her flower garden, for she held a short hoe in one hand and a sun-bonnet shaded her piquant face.

It might have been the fever's aftermath that made him feel suddenly light-headed, except that Margaret Morgan always seemed to have that effect on him. As youngsters, growing into manhood and womanhood, they had been friends and companions, but since his father's death a year ago they had seemed to grow apart. Ben had blamed her coolness on the fact that he'd been too busy with the farm to call as often as he once had.

Now there was another rumor making the rounds. It was being whispered that Spade Cutter, Liberty's handsome young sheriff, had been seen riding to Morgan's far oftener than duty could justify.

Ben was remembering the rumor as he halted beside the girl and climbed stiffly from his saddle. "Howdy, Margaret," he said, with an ease that he did not feel. "Your dad home?"

Ben was not a big man, but the diminutiveness of the girl made him seem large. Her face was oval beneath the brim of her bonnet. She looked up at Tampa, the same cool, unreadable quality in her brown-eyed gaze that he had read there so often of late. Then he saw her expression change. Her red lips parted with surprise.

"Ben!" Her voice suddenly had its old warmth. "Why, I hardly recognized you. You—you look terrible. Dad said you'd been sick, but I—I—" she stammered lamely.

The appearance of her father at the front door of their house saved her from more enbarrassment. Carley Morgan was a big, frosty-haired man with a ruddy, clean-shaven face.

"Ben Tampa!" he boomed. "By the Lord Harry, I'm glad to see you out and about again, son. Come in and set. Supper time ain't more'n an hour away."

As they clasped hands, Ben shook his head. "An hour from now will likely see me in Liberty." The quietness of his voice and the grim hardness of his face brought a swift change in Morgan.

"Trouble, son?" he asked gently. "Tell."

Ben shrugged, and some of the indecision that was in his own mind crept into his words. "I'm damned if I rightly know," he said. As briefly as possible, he summed up Link Shotwell's visit and his talks with the other farmers on the creek.

"Carley," he finished, "you've got to side me on this. We've got to keep the rest of the folks along the creek from doing anything foolish until we learn why Shotwell wants the Tampa Trail."

Morgan pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Sure you ain't got your wind up about nothin', son?" he asked gently. "Five hundred now would just about mean salvation until the crops come in. Then there's another angle. If we back you, we're bucking a tough combine. I ain't sayin' I won't side you. I'm just pointin' out that things are pretty bad in Liberty right now, with Linked S hands sashayin' around like God Almighty. One word to them from Shotwell and we'll have night-riders cutting our fences and torching our hay stacks. I'm with you, son—" the old farmer's voice was deadly serious "—but God help us all if you touch spark to the powder!"

CHAPTER THREE

Message for a Farmer

NEITHER of them noticed Margaret Morgan's pale face as she turned swiftly and headed toward the house. A moment later Ben himself was swinging back to leather and spurring his brown out of the yard. Morgan's warning rode with him as he headed into a shortcut trail across the foothills that would connect with the new Sioux Road a couple of miles farther on.

He was gambling and he knew it. Morgan was right. A spark touched to the powder of Shotwell's wrath might end in devastation for all of them—castastrophe that one word of agreement from him could prevent.

The grim responsibility of the course he had chosen brought sweat to his brow as he pushed to the top of the ridge ahead. It stung his eyes, and he brought a bandanna from his pocket to mop his face.

He crested the ridge. Somewhere close by a horse whinnied a greeting to his saddler. Ben yanked the bandanna from his face. His questing gaze found a gray picketed alongside a clump of buckbrush to the right of the trail. At first he made out no sign of its rider, and then he saw a man emerge from behind a clump of brush. The other evidently had seen him first, for Ben got the distinct impression that the stranger had slapped something out of sight in one capacious pocket of a linen duster he was wearing. A butterfly net was in the man's other hand, and his long legs were sending him on a wild chase across the grassy swales. The man kept swiping with his net.

Ben's brown mount snorted and fidgeted, and Ben just sat there in his saddle, too dumbfounded by the strange spectacle to do anything else. The sight of a gangly man in a linen duster chasing butterflies across the foothills of the Bighorns was just too much. For the first time in a good many days Ben Tampa gave vent to hearty laughter.

The stranger's chase was bringing him in a circle back toward the young farmer. Ben's horse snorted again, and shied. "Sho' now—" he slapped the brown's withers. "—I don't blame you for getting all boogery. But we better hold up here jest a minute longer. Ain't no tellin', mebbe that pore feller is out of his haid and needin' help."

"Were you addressing me, sir?" The dustered stranger had drawn to a halt a few feet away.

Ben looked the man over. Beneath the shapeless linen was a lean, powerful body. At least that was the impression Ben got. And behind the gold-rimmed glasses, through which the brown-faced stranger peered, were a pair of eyes that might have looked considerably sharper without those lenses to distort them. But that was just the feeling Ben got. He scratched his head, and one of his dark brows cocked ironically.

"Why, friend," Ben answered him, "I was tryin' to gentle my hoss. It ain't every day we see bug-hunters!"

"I am Professor Dabney Jones," the stranger said with dignity, "and I am not a—what you call a bug-hunter, sir. I am here on a mission of great importance

for an Eastern institute. One of the specimens I have been stalking for hours was frightened by the approach of your horse."

"Now, professor," Ben said gently, "I'm right sorry. Next time when I'm going to ride near where you're working, I'll tie green cowhide over my hoss's hoofs to muffle 'em."

"Thank you." Professor Dabney Jones bowed stiffly. "Your apologies are accepted, sir."

Was that a twinkle he detected in the blue eyes behind the distorting lenses? Ben pondered the question as he rode on toward Liberty. He wondered again about the quick movement of the stranger in slipping something into one duster pocket as he pulled the butterfly net from the other.

"Hell, probably I imagined it," Ben chided himself. "Dang it, I'm getting worse than an old woman. If anybody looks at me crossways I'll crack my brains trying to figure out why they're doing it. Cavalry Creek has got enough trouble on its hands, without me getting so I jump every time I see a shadow."

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REACHING the county seat, Ben made his first stop at Doctor Chester's house on the outskirts of town. His body was stiff from the riding he had been doing, but he forced himself to forget the way he felt. He had to keep going, and that was that.

The little bald-headed doctor let Ben into the house. His wise blue eyes, that had seen much of human misery, scanned the young farmer keenly. "I told you to stay in bed three days more," he said sternly. "If you have a relapse, I won't be responsible. But damn it, I knew you'd come if anybody was fool enough to stop by and tell you Limpy was hurt."

"How is he?" Ben asked as he followed the doctor down a hall that led to the bedrooms in the rear.

Doctor Chester shook his head. "Frankly, I don't know," he confessed. "You can't tell about concussions. That red-headed Slant Barnes gun-whipped him good, and a man of Parks' age can't stand things like that. Blast it, Tampa—" the little doctor turned, with his hand on the knob of a bedroom door, and his eyes flashed "—this kind of thing has got to stop! Right now the Linked S thinks it owns Liberty. Barnes has been swaggering around town all day bragging about what he'll do to the next sodbuster who crosses his track."

Ben's eyes were flashing as he returned the doctor's stare, but his voice was soft. "Mebbe we'll give Barnes the chance to make good his brag before the day's done. Can I see Limpy?"

"He keeps calling for you," Doctor Chester answered promptly. "Seems like there's something on his mind. I'd have sent someone to bring you to town, if I hadn't figured you were better off in bed. But now you're here it may ease his mind to have a confab with you. I'll warn you ahead of time, though, Tampa, that I wouldn't take any stock in whatever he wants to tell you. Concussion makes men think mighty queer thoughts sometimes."

Limpy Parks was mumbling and picking at the quilt with calloused fingers when Ben followed Doctor Chester into the dimly lighted bedroom. Ben stood by the bed for a long minute before the old farm hand opened his eyes, and while he stood there his straight mouth drew down at the corners. Unconsciously, his fingers strayed to the walnut butt of the old .44 Colt he had shoved inside the waistband of his corduroy pants. The gun was loaded with the shells he'd taken from Shotwell's belt.

"Linked S lead for Linked S gun-hands." He hardly realized that he had spoken aloud, but his voice was enough to rouse Limpy Parks from the stupor which gripped him. His hand shot out with amazing speed to grip his employer's wrist.

"Ben!" he husked. "Ben, dang bust it, it's good to see you, boy! Got somethin' to tell you. Was on my way home to tell yuh when—" His words drifted into a hopeless mumble.

Ben felt his body tense, as the thought crossed his mind that the attack on Limpy might have some bearing on why Link Shotwell wanted to buy the right-of-way to the Tampa Trail.

"Limpy," he said, with a harsh urgency in his voice that brought the old farm hand back from the black vale into which

he was slipping, "what were you coming home to tell me? Quick, fella! What was it? Was that why Slant Barnes jumped you?"

"Barnes?" Limpy Parks was blinking owlishly. "Barnes? Dunno no Barnes. But I know the perfessor—Yeah." He went into a fit of high-pitched laughter that was almost like a spasm. "I shore do. See the perfessor—" Limpy's eyes closed again.

Ben felt Doctor Chester's hand on his arm. "You've learned all you can," the medico said quietly. "No telling when he'll be conscious again. He took quite a belting."

Ben straightened from beside the injured man's bed. In the dusk of the room his face looked almost somber. "Mebbe," he said very softly, "I've learned just about enough."

Doctor Chester looked puzzled. "What do you mean by that, Tampa?"

Ben licked his parched lips. "Doc," he said, "I don't rightly know. But I do know that Link Shotwell wants to buy the right-of-way to the road my dad blazed into Freedom Valley, and is willing to pay each of us five hundred in cash money."

Doctor Chester snorted. His voice was sarcastic when he answered. "Shotwell ain't sprouted any wings that I ever noticed," he snapped. "Why should he want exclusive right-of-way to a road he's got as much right to use as any of the rest of us?"

Ben shrugged. "That's what I'm here to find out," he said. "And," he added, more slowly, "mebbe Limpy's given me an idea."

"PROFESSOR Dabney Jones?" repeated the pimply young clerk at the desk of Liberty's single hotel, the Montana House. "Sorry, he ain't in. His key is right here in the box."

Evening was darkening the sky when Ben tramped back outside. It was the supper hour, and the street was almost empty. Ben drank in the peaceful scene. Liberty had been a pleasant town before the coming of Link Shotwell and his Texas crew. Now a man who wasn't one of them took his life in his hands when he walked the street. It had to stop!

Almost directly across the street from the hotel was the squat, log-walled jail. Lights shining through the front windows told him that Sheriff Spade Cutter was there.

Ben made his way across the street. A picture of Limpy Parks' seamed face, and of the blood-stained bandage that circled his head, was before his eyes as he pushed the plank door open and stepped into the lighted room.

After the duskiness outside, the sudden illumination made him blink, and before he could adjust his eyes to see who was in the jail a jarring voice said, "Blast me, if it ain't another one of 'em! Spade, these danged sodbusters got to be taught their place. Want me—"

The scene had cleared for Ben now. He stood just inside the door, teetering on old cracked boots that had been resoled and patched until there was little of the original leather left in them. In contrast to the good clothes sported by the sheriff and red-headed Slant Barnes, he looked little better than a drifter down on his luck. The anger that was in him

NO FINER DRINK... At home or on the go

brought a hard, tough smile to Ben Tampa's face.

He twisted to face the red-headed *segundo* of the Linked S. "Yeah," he flung back at the Linked S man, "I'm here. You'll find lots of folks calling on the sheriff, if things keep going this way."

"What do you mean by that, Tampa?" The words were chill, and unfriendly, coming from Sheriff Spade Cutter.

Ben swung on the lawman, raked him from head to heel with a hot glance. The sheriff was handsome, there was no denying it. He was a tall, sleek looking man in his middle twenties, no older than Ben himself. Right now his smooth face showed nothing but displeasure at this intrusion. Ben noticed the neck of a whiskey bottle above the curve of the sheriff's roll-top desk.

"I mean that the Linked S has got to quit riding this town!" he told the lawman. "We're citizens. Mebbe some of our votes helped elect you, I dunno about that. But regardless, we're entitled to protection. Cutter, I'm demanding that you arrest Slant Barnes for assault and battery!"

"Why, you got the guts of a mule!" The redhead came out of his chair as though he had springs in the seat of his pants. Fists that were half the size of a ham whistled out at the Freedom Valley farmer.

Ben ducked one blow. A second caught him full in the chest, and took the sting from his own fists as he rapped a left and right into the cowpoke's midriff. Weakness made his arms heavy, took the spring from his legs. One of Slant Barnes' fists raked across his cheekbone. Red light danced before Ben's vision, and the bitter realization came to him that he had made a fool of himself. Any man with sense would have stuck to one chore. Now he was in for worse than Limpy had got. Thought of the pitiful state the old farmhand was in seemed to lend his muscles strength as the redhead bored in, sensing the kill.

In his confidence, Barnes had left himself wide open. Through the red haze before his eyes, Ben saw the man's grinning mouth. He used it for a target, and all of the strength he had found went into a single blow. Sharp pain shot up his arm—pain from knuckles cut by teeth that weren't much more than broken stubs. Barnes tottered backward, blood gushing from his mouth. For the first time, the Linked S foreman seemed to think of the gun at his hip. His hand swept toward it.

"Slant!" Sheriff Spade Cutter was on his feet. "Drop it! Stop this damned foolishness or I'll knock out the rest of your teeth!"

The redheaded puncher twisted, the corner of his battered mouth lifting like a half-wild dog snarling at its master. Then he ducked his head and shuffled past the Liberty lawman, muttering something about washing up.

Ben watched the redhead go, and he could hardly believe that it was over. He had never expected Cutter to take a hand. The sheriff's hard eyes were looking at him now.

"Get out of here, Tampa," he ordered. "Dust it! Stick around this town any longer and I won't be responsible for what happens to you."

Weariness such as he had never experienced before tugged like lead weights at Ben's shoulders. He had to have rest, and he knew it. He had to get back home and climb into bed. A man needed a keen brain to match wits with Link Shotwell—not a head full of fog.

"I'll go," he said dully. "Thanks for puttin' in your two-bits worth."

Spade Cutter laughed. The sound was brittle in the small office. "I ain't wanting to see you dead, or any of the rest of your plowshare breed on Cavalry Creek—not for a while yet!" He was still laughing as though at some secret joke when Ben turned and stumbled out through the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

Talk or Be Damned

MEMORY of the sheriff's laughter, and of his last remark, haunted Ben all the way back to Freedom Valley. Cutter didn't want to see any Cavalry Creek farmer dead—not for a while.

"Mebbe a little later he won't give a damn what happens to us," Ben muttered as he swung from the bosque of the creek and up a slight rise to the bench

where his farm and house were located. "Wonder if mebbe he'd like to see us daid after we sell Shotwell the Tampa Trail. . . . *What in tarnation?*"

The expression was jerked from Ben's lips as he lifted his sagging head to view the yard. A hundred feet ahead stood the trim farmhouse his father had built here. Every window was ablaze with light! Ben blinked, thinking for a minute that his eyes were tricking him.

Seven horses were tethered at the peeled pole rail in the yard. Light splashing out from the open front door made it possible for him to recognize some of the animals, and it gave him a second shock. One of the saddlers was Link Shotwell's black! The others belonged on Cavalry Creek, mounts of the men he had called on that afternoon!

Sudden alarm, that was like the hot stimulus of whiskey, lifted Ben from his saddle. He hurried toward the open door, and the sound of his boots on the risers of the porch steps warned the men inside of his arrival.

In the doorway he paused, a sagging, battered man, with two spots of fever glowing in his flat cheeks. But the fever in his cheeks was no hotter than the dark glow in his eyes as he surveyed the group seated stiffly about his living room. Some of the farmers appeared almost shamefaced as they looked at him. Others averted their eyes uneasily. Ben knew what had happened, even before his hot glance flicked across the complacent face of Link Shotwell.

"So you've sold me out." His voice was harsher than he realized. "I always figured a Cavalry Creek man's word was worth something."

"Whoa up there, son!" Frosty-haired old Carley Morgan climbed to his feet from his place by the oak center table. "Don't go off half-cocked. Ain't nobody sold anybody out. Why-all do you figure we're here?"

Ben looked at the one man he had figured he could trust above all the rest. "You tell me," he said bluntly.

"That's better," Carley Morgan nodded. "Come on in and set while I talk. Dang it, you look like somethin' dragged from the river. If I had a bottle—"

"Get on with things, Morgan!" Shotwell interrupted. "I cain't stay around here all night."

Ben took the chair Carley Morgan shoved toward him. He relaxed in it and closed his eyes, and a gray depression filled his mind. So far he had accomplished exactly nothing, and there were hungry kids along Cavalry Creek, more than likely dreaming of gum drops that pennies would buy—pennies their father didn't own. That was why they were all here. Five hundred dollars was enough to give all of these poor men hope.

"Have your say, Carley," he said wearily.

Morgan's voice seemed to come from a distance. "Shotwell visited us all this afternoon. He had a little different story to tell about who started the fracas between you two this morning, but that don't matter now. What does matter is this: He had an extry petition in his saddle-bags. Tuh make a long story short, son, we've all signed it. You tried to make us think they was somethin' funny about him wanting the right-of-way to the Tampa Trail. Way Link explained it, I cain't see your point. He's got herds grazing south of Liberty that can connect direct with the Trail—and miles means dollars when you're driving cattle."

Shotwell could use the Trail without owning it. That was the thing which had stuck in Ben Tampa's craw ever since the man had visited him that morning.

Morgan was continuing his talk. "Miles means dollars when you're driving cattle," he repeated. "We all see that, son, and we come here tonight to make you see it, too—for the sake of all of us."

"You're beating around the bush," Shotwell interrupted arrogantly. "Tampa, things amount to just this: Every man holdin' a share of the Tampa Trail has signed up with me except you. And you've got to sign—or the hull deal is off!"

Ben spoke without opening his eyes, and a thread of excitement was running through him. He felt like a man drawing a second pair of aces to fill the two already in his hand.

"I can get along without your money, Link," he said softly. "You can use my strip of Trail free of charge."

"You won't sell?" The words seemed drawn from Carley Morgan. "Ben—"

Ben shook his head. "I didn't say that, Carley. I'll sell when Link tells us why he's willing to pay money for a right-of-way he can use free of charge!"

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FOR a pulsing minute his refusal seemed to hang like a noxious fog in the air. Then a chair scraped back. Ben had his eyes open now, watching Link Shotwell narrowly as the Liberty range-lord swayed to his feet. Murder, the rank lust to kill, glared at him from the eyes of the man. Ben met Shotwell's gaze with the defiant stare of a terrier eyeing a mastiff.

"Talk, Link," he said flatly. "Talk, or be damned to you!"

The Linked S kingpin had gained control of himself. He leaned forward, doubled fists braced against the table top. "You'll be damned if you don't meet my offer!" he said hoarsely. His gaze swept the worn, hopeless faces of the other farmers in the room. "I'll leave him to you," he said harshly. "Talk some sense into his head. I'll give you twenty-four hours! Then—"

He left the implied threat hanging and turned and strode through the door. A moment later the creak of saddle leather and the pound of hoofs told them that Shotwell was leaving.

The man was gone, but his presence still seemed to fill the farmhouse.

Carley Morgan licked his lips. "Then," he said, and his voice was dry as dust, "he'll turn loose his crew on our crops. Ben, I told you not to spark the powder."

The other farmers were clambering to their feet. A dull silence held them. There'd be no pennies now for kids to buy gum drops. No new stoves or paint for barns that needed it. Mebbe, even, no grub in cupboards, once the merchants in Liberty learned that a range war was brewing. They'd clamp down on credit. That was what these men were thinking, Ben realized as he looked at them.

And they were looking at him, too. Their eyes were accusing. Once they had regarded his father as their leader. That leadership had virtually passed into his own hands when the elder Tampa had died. But the feeling was gone now. They had nothing left for him now but hatred.

"You got no family," one of them muttered. "You got nothing. It's too damned bad your dad had to die!"

The words roused Ben. He knew now that he had nothing more to lose, and the human desire was in him to justify his actions. Weariness chained him to his chair, but he managed to break its bonds and gain his feet. One hand on the oak table to steady himself, he swayed there, facing the men who condemned him.

"You talk," he said bitterly, "and talk, and you take the word of a man who hates your guts. You're doing that because you're so hard up. I know that. But from the look of things, there ain't a one of you can see farther than the end of your nose. All right, I'm damned and I'll stay damned—until I find out why Shotwell wants our right-of-way!

"There's something damned sneaky going on," he added, more quietly. "I know you'll all laugh at this, but there's a bug-hunter mixed in it someways. I ran into the cuss this afternoon on my ride to town. Limpy was in bed at Doc Chester's when I got there. He's in right bad shape, but he managed to tell me to see 'the perfessor'. You can draw your own conclusions, like I've drawn mine. Personally I figure the bug-hunter had something to do with Limpy gettin' gun-whipped. Mebbe that sounds crazy to you. It sounds a little bit crazy to me, too, but I'm going to play the hand to a finish."

"Why didn't yuh see this bug-hunter when you were in town, son?" Carley Morgan was doing his best to keep proceedings on a friendly plane.

"I tried," Ben answered. "He wasn't at the hotel. But I'm going to see him tonight. Shotwell gave us twenty-four hours."

Carley Morgan studied Tampa, and a look of concern crossed his bluff, hearty face. "Son," he said, "I can't say I admire your stand, but I got to admit you're loaded with courage. If you're headin' back to Liberty tonight, I'm riding with you."

Ben shook his head, and his lips drew down at the corners. "No." He waved his hand. "I'm playing this alone. You all think I'm a fool. Mebbe I am, but I

ain't draggin' anybody into the jackpot with me."

The Cavalry Creek farmers were clumping out one by one, their shoulders bowed with despondency. Ben watched them go, and shook his head. "If I'm wrong," he muttered, "God help us and Cavalry Creek!"

He waited there by the table until the fading beat of hoofs told him that all of the Freedom Valley farmers were gone, and then he moved outside to his horse.

"We've done a lot of chasin' today, hoss," he told his saddler as he gathered the reins and mounted, "and we got a mite more to do. I'm only hopin' we ain't riding the wild goose trail!"

Ben followed the roundabout Tampa Trail back to Liberty, and something told him it might be for the last time. As he rode through the starlit dark, he studied the length of the path his father had blazed into Freedom Valley, trying to make the old road itself yield the secret of its sudden worth. But the Trail was the same as it always had been—just a road winding between opposing hills that narrowed and grew more rugged as he neared Liberty.

Ben was shaking his head despondently by the time he reached town. The Trail had given him no answer to the questions banked in his mind. He fought down a desire to pause at Doctor Chester's house. Limpy was probably still out of his head, and time was too important now to waste in trying to piece together the mutterings of a half-stunned man.

Conscious of the warning Sheriff Spade Cutter had given him, Ben turned down an alley to ride behind the building flanking the main street. It galled him to think that things had reached the point where Cavalry Creek men had to skulk through the dark like coyotes, but there were times when it was better for a man to play safe than run the risk of trouble—or worse.

"Time enough for trouble later," Ben counseled himself as he dismounted and ground-hitched his mount behind the Montana House. "Right now your job is to see that bug-hunter."

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A LONG hall, flanked by the kitchen and storerooms, led through to the lobby of the hotel. Ben walked it and stepped to the desk, where the pimply youth was still on duty.

"That perfessor come in yet?" he asked curtly.

The clerk's sallow face was a study. An expression compounded of relief and fear crossed it. "Yes," he nodded, and leaned across the counter to speak in a voice that he unconsciously lowered to a whisper. "He came in, Mr. Tampa, and the first person he asked for was you."

Ben blinked. "Me!" He half-stuttered the word. "Why, I— What number's his room?"

"He—he isn't in now," the clerk was still whispering, "and I—it—it's got me worried. He was hardly in his room tonight when Mr. Cutter and Slant Barnes came to see him. Mr. Barnes looked like he'd been fighting."

Ben glanced down at the skinned knuckles of his right hand. "He had," he said drily. "Go on."

The clerk nodded. "A few minutes afterward the three of them came back downstairs. Mr. Jones was walking in the middle. Mr. Cutter was carrying his coat across his arm, and—and it looked to me like his coat was hiding a gun! I didn't know what to do."

Ben Tampa's face had turned hard as rock. "There wasn't anything you could do," he said flatly. "Give me the key to that bug-hunter's room."

M. Howard Lane, the author of this hard-hitting novel of the men of Freedom Valley, has written a rousing epic of action on the California gold-coast for next month's *10 Story Western!* Be sure to read his salty, colorful novelette of Forty-niners who clashed with the high-handed waterfront buccaneers of old 'Frisco and Monterey! On sale May 8th!

The clerk looked undecided. "It—it's against the rules, Mr. Tampa. I—"

Almost casually Ben slipped his old .44 from inside the waistband of his pants. "Son," he said gently, "give me that key. I'm makin' my own rules. . . ."

He got the key.

Ben lit a bracket lamp on the wall just inside the door of Professor Dabney Jones' room. He closed the door behind him and as the lamplight drove back the shadows he looked around. A glance was enough to show him that nothing had been disturbed. Either the professor had accompanied the sheriff and the battered redhead willingly, or else they had surprised him completely.

And yet there had to be something here —something that would give him the key to mystery. Limpy had told him to 'see the perfessor'. And Dabney Jones had asked for him at the desk. If only he'd had the sense to introduce himself when he'd met the man this afternoon, there might be no mystery now, Ben realized. But it was too late to regret past happenings.

There was a long telescope bag beneath the edge of the bed across the room. Ben eyed it. It went against the grain to probe through another man's belongings, and then he remembered that gun the clerk had suspected of being beneath the sheriff's coat when the three of them had left the hotel. He remembered the impoverished farmers out on Cavalry Creek, and the thought was like a hand between his shoulders. It seemed to push him across the floor.

Ben stopped to pull the bag into the open. It was heavier than he had suspected. Metal grated against metal inside the case. Some of the contents, hastily stuffed into the unlatched end of the bag, spilled to the floor.

Ben straightened slowly, and his brain started to spin. Like a man with his eyes suddenly opened for the first time, he stood staring down at what lay on the floor. Shimmering in the lamplight was a surveyor's transit and chain!

The lock on the door grated. Dry hinges creaked. Ben twisted in a half crouch. His old Colt was in his hand when the door swung open, then slowly he let the weapon sag.

"One surprise ain't enough for a man," he said with a sigh, "so now I get another. Margaret, what in Tophet are you doing here this time of night?"

It was Carley Morgan's daughter who stood in the doorway. She clutched the frame with one hand, and her breasts were heaving beneath the fringed leather jacket she wore. Either fatigue or intense excitement was filling the girl.

"Ben," her voice was almost a gasp, "thank God I've found you!"

The girl's smooth hair was disheveled. As he stepped to her, Ben saw that her silk blouse beneath the jacket had been torn across one shoulder. The flesh beneath showed a streak of red—red that was no brighter than the anger that suddenly filled the young Cavalry Creek farmer.

"Margaret!" The girl had slipped into the curve of Ben's arm, and the warmth of her body against him made his voice quiver. "Margaret, if somebody's laid a hand on you, I'll—"

"It was Spade," the girl whispered. "Spade Cutter. But that doesn't matter now. Mr. Jones—"

Ben still held the girl, and he made himself a fierce vow that he was never going to let her go again, but now was not the time to tell her that. There were things more important to Liberty and Freedom Valley than the love of a man for a woman.

"Dabney Jones," he told the girl, "is about as much of a bug-hunter as you or me. The man's a surveyor—here on the quiet, pretendin' to be somebody he ain't. There's only one reason for it, Margaret. One reason." Ben found his voice choking up. "Ol' Limpy's dream and our dream is going to come true. Jones is here to make a preliminary survey for some railroad that's going to bring the iron horse to Montana!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Linked S Showdown

MARGARET MORGAN'S brown head nodded against his chest, then she bent back to look up at his thin, tense face. "The Northern Pacific," she said. "I know—"

"You know?" Ben gripped the girl's arm until she winced.

"I found out tonight," she said rapidly. "Ben, we've got to make a ride to that old trapper's shack in the Notch above our place. I stopped at the house and told dad. He's riding the creek to get more help—and I came on here to try and find you."

Quick thoughts were rioting through Ben's mind. He nodded jerkily and followed the girl into the hall. "Cutter and Barnes," he said grimly, "took Jones from here tonight, after I headed for home. They've got him at ol' Trapper John's place, aiming to hold him until Shotwell can close a deal for the Tampa Trail. That's why Limpy told me 'to see the perfessor'. Jones must have found out that he worked for me, and given him the word to have me meet him here at the hotel. Shotwell, with his political connections, probably had secret advance word that the railroad was coming through this way. That's why he built the Sioux Road to Cavalry Creek, figuring to make it easier for him to get hold of the Trail. But when Jones showed up it forced his hand.

"He had to polish off Limpy and hurry the signing of his petition. He knew damned well we'd give Jones our right-of-way for a reasonable figure because the railroad would mean a chance to get rid of our crops at a low hauling rate."

"Shotwell," Margaret Morgan said, "wants to gain control of the Trail so he can hold it for some fantastic price. His own surveyors have told him it's the only feasible route for the rails to follow."

"You talk like you know," Ben said.

Five minutes later the girl was answering his comment. Ben had brought his horse around the corner of the hotel to meet her. Side by side now, they sent their mounts into the Sioux Road.

"We can thank Link for a quick way to get to the Notch," Ben told her tightly. "Speaking of Shotwell and his trained seals, what about this Cutter?"

Margaret Morgan spoke through the wind of their ride. "When you were at the house this afternoon, Ben," she said unaffectedly, "and I saw how badly you looked, it did something to me. I listened to you and dad wondering about why Shotwell wanted the Tampa Trail, and I promised myself that I—I'd do anything to make Mr. Cutter tell me the secret, if he knew it.

"Tonight I thought the chance had come. He came to the house after dad had returned from your place, and told me that you had bucked them all. I think dad admired your stand, but he couldn't very well admit it. He told me you were riding to town to see this 'professor'. Then Spade Cutter called. He seemed awfully excited, and he wanted me to take a ride with him. I was willing. It wasn't hard to make him talk. He—he'd been drinking, and he wanted to brag. He took me to Trapper John's and showed me Mr. Jones. That was when the story came out. They were going to hold me prisoner, too, as a club to make you sign over your share of the Trail. But I managed to get out while they were pouring a drink. Now—"

"Now the Cavalry Creek men and your dad are riding the wild goose trail," Ben cut her short.

"You mean—"

"I mean they won't find Jones at Trapper John's. Cutter and Barnes will get him away from there pronto. And if they can keep him, Link Shotwell will still win the Tampa Trail!"

They were approaching a turn-off that led toward the foothills of the Bighorns, and the Linked S headquarters. Ben swung into it. When they were on the new road, he answered the question on the girl's lips before she could voice it. His own face was flint-hard in the starlight.

"We're going to the Linked S, yes," he said curtly. "Leastways, I am. There's a trail a quarter mile ahead that I used this afternoon. You can take it and head for your place."

Margaret Morgan had inherited the pioneer spirit of her father. "You're not going to ride into danger alone," he said quietly. "I see now what is in your mind. You're thinking that Cutter and Barnes have left Trapper John's and brought Dabney Jones to the Linked S."

Ben nodded. A little smile twitched his lips. His answer was almost light-hearted. "You catch on fast, chiquita," he drawled. "But you ain't got the answer yet. It's

just this. I told you that if Shotwell can keep Jones prisoner for a few days, he'll still win the Trail. And he will. He's got the power to force us to sign over our right-of-way, and he'll use it. It'll be either that or die trying to defend our homes! He'll burn our crops, he'll burn our homes, and kill any man who tries to interfere. The law is on his side. He put Cutter in office, and the cuss won't lift a finger to protect us."

"Then we—"

"We've got one chance," Ben told her more quietly. "I'm certain that if Jones passed the word to Limpy that he wanted to see me, he was empowered to sign an agreement with us. If we can put that over, Shotwell's hands will be tied."

"You're right!" Margaret Morgan nodded vehemently. "Oh, Ben, you've got to be! But can we rescue him?"

"We can't," he told her grimly, "but mebbe *I* can. The trail's just ahead. You're turning off to your place."

"I'm not!" Margaret snapped. "I told you that. There isn't time for me to ride to the Notch and get dad and the others. No, Ben," she added gently, "we're riding this trail together."

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THERE was no use arguing with her. Ben found that out on the hour-long ride to the Linked S. No argument that he could use had any effect on the girl.

A last-quarter moon was just cresting the jagged Bighorns when they galloped into the wide yard of the Linked S. Its light showed horses bunched in front of Shotwell's sprawling ranchhouse.

Ben headed straight for them. Sometimes boldness meant safety. If there were lookouts posted on the dark porch they would hesitate to fire at anyone approaching so openly.

The girl's eyes were sharper than his fever-dimmed ones. She was the first to recognize the mounts bunched before the steps, and her words were only another surprise in the tapestry of events woven throughout the day.

"Dad's already here!" Margaret cried. "Dad—and the rest!"

He wasn't the only one, Ben realized now, who had figured that Cutter and Barnes would get the surveyor away from Trapper John's after the girl's escape. Morgan and the Cavalry Creek men had come straight here. But where were they now? A blaze of lights behind the windows of the ranchhouse seemed to answer his question.

Side by side they reined in before the steps. Ben was the first on the ground.

A voice he didn't recognize rasped out from the porch, "So it's you, Tampa! Well, come on up here, you and the girl! The boss is going to be mighty glad to have you join his little party."

Involuntarily Ben's hand started toward the Colt inside his waistband. "Don't try that," the voice warned. "I ain't empty-handed. Come on!"

Ben started up the steps. Margaret, he noticed, stayed a pace behind him, and he was glad. If any lead started flying, he didn't want her to be in the way.

A tall shadow waited on the porch. It was one of Shotwell's Texas riders. The faint shine of moonlight that seeped beneath the porch roof touched the blue steel of the man's Colt.

"Step ahead of me, Tampa," he drawled, "and stand still."

Ben did as he was told. There wasn't anything else he could do. He felt the muzzle of the man's gun hit his spine, and saw one arm snake around to drag the Colt from his waistband. Ben was just planning to grab that hand, and make his bid for command of the situation, when he felt the gun-muzzle slip from his back.

Margaret Morgan's voice, suddenly icy, was coming gently through the dark. "A man should never ignore a woman," she was saying. "They have teeth too. I've got a .32 pistol against your ribs, mister, and I'm apt to pull the trigger."

Ben went into action even as the girl spoke. He had his own gun in his hand, and he was whirling. One down stroking blow, and the Linked S hand was sagging against him. He caught the man and eased him to the porch floor, then helped himself to the hombre's gun. Standing there with a weapon in each hand, he gave the girl a smile.

"You're a right nice partner!" he whispered. "Keep that gun of yours handy."

On feet that he made no effort to quiet, Ben moved down a wide, covered corridor that divided the house in two parts. Light slipped from beneath a closed door on his right.

"Open up!" he called loudly, figuring the muffling panel would disguise his voice. "I've got a couple more recruits for your party, boss. Tampa and a gal—"

Ben heard Margaret gasp at his audacity, and then the door was swinging inward. Half the room lay exposed to his eyes, and in that single instant Ben saw enough.

Big Link Shotwell was standing at a long center table like a man addressing a director's meeting—only it was a queer meeting. Guns lay piled on the board in front of him, and lounging range riders with naked Colts in their hands leaned against the walls guarding the men seated stiffly about the long table. All of them were there—all the Cavalry Creek men. Dabney Jones was with them, but he did not look like a bug-hunter now. Without the distorting glasses to hide his eyes, he looked like what he was—a clean-cut, hard-fighting surveyor.

At Ben's call, Shotwell looked toward the opening door. A confident grin split his lips. "Bring 'em in," he said jovially. "They're all we need to make our shindig complete. We got a little signin' for Tampa to do, and this time he won't say no. Not unless he wants to join a lot of his friends in Boothill."

Ben stepped into the doorway. He held a canted Colt in each hand. "There's just two gents slated for Boothill around here. They're you, Shotwell, and you, Cutter." His voice held the hard edge of a file. "You've rodded this country long enough, Shotwell. It's time decent men had a look-in."

A gun roared from the wall alongside the young Cavalry Creek farmer. Lead intended for him *chunked* into the doorframe. The roar of that single shot was like the touch of fire to a fuse.

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BEN twisted and triggered a bullet toward the Linked S hand who had fired at him. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a confused picture of a table-full of men erupting toward the weapons Shotwell had piled in the center of the long board. The rider who had fired at him was folding forward, clutching his stomach. He was out of the fight.

Lead burned close to Ben's right arm. In a crouch he whirled, and he had time to appreciate the feel of grim elation surging through him. The fight had had to come sometime. Either they were going to live as free men in a country ruled by law and order or they were going to be slaves controlled by the cattleman.

As he got around, Ben caught a glimpse of Slant Barnes coming at him. Gunsmoke wreathed the redhead's battered face. He sidestepped the *segundo's* charge, and lashed out with the barrel of his right-hand Colt. Steel struck bone. As Barnes fell, Ben caught the unforgettable picture of Sheriff Spade Cutter falling before the flaming gun of Carley Morgan—a bloody-headed pioneer who had fought red savages for the land he owned. The rest of them were going into action, too. Their hands were more used now to the feel of plow-handles, but they hadn't forgotten how to hold bucking Colts.

"Come on, you Texas wildcats, eat lead!" Gaunt Dane Lansing, whose wife wanted a new stove, was singing that challenge.

Link Shotwell was bleeding from a half dozen wounds that would have felled an ordinary man; yet he was still on his feet, a raging devil with a smoking revolver in each fist. He and Ben spotted each other at the same moment.

"You!" Shotwell yelled. "You brought this on! Damn you, Tampa. I—" He tried to lift his guns, but they were too heavy.

Ben held his fire. He couldn't shoot a man already dying on his feet. In this last moment he could even feel sorry for Link Shotwell. The range should have been big enough for all of them. They could have enjoyed together the prosperity the rails would bring, but Shotwell had wanted too much.

The Linked S owner was falling now, toppling like a pine under the chopper's axe. It signaled the end. There were Texas men still on their feet, but with their leader gone, the fight went out of

them. Hands high, they dropped their guns.

Every Cavalry Creek man, Ben saw, was bleeding from one or more wounds, but none of them were dead. Those old boys were too tough.

"And there isn't a one who won't live to see steel running along the Tampa Trail," Margaret Morgan told Ben Tampa a little later, after she had finished staunching the worst of their wounds.

"We'll all live to see the iron horse," Carley Morgan agreed, and his grip was firm on Ben Tampa's hand. "Thanks to you, son."

There were others to add their own words. Men who had hated him only a few hours before were quick to sing his praises now. Ben chuckled inwardly at the sudden change.

Dabney Jones, one arm hanging limp in a bloody sleeve, was the last to thrust himself forward. He had a smile on his face. "If I'd known you were Tampa this afternoon," he said, "I'd have taken off the wraps. Maybe it's a damned cold-blooded thing to say now, but I like this work-out of our problems better. The Northern Pacific is going to have enough trouble getting rails laid, without having to fight range tycoons to boot. Maybe, too, it seems like a funny time to make offers, but I've got the right to authorize five hundred apiece for a right-of-way through Freedom Valley."

"Five hundred apiece?" Ben Tampa couldn't help smiling. He felt the warmth of Margaret Morgan's body close against his arm. "Why, Jones, that sum sounds right familiar, but I never figured until tonight that I might be using it to pay for a honeymoon!"

"A honeymoon!" Carley Morgan choked.

"Yes." Margaret Morgan's voice was defiant. "Is there anything wrong with that, father?"

Carley Morgan's face turned as red as the blood which dyed his white hair. "Why, why, daughter, I guess there ain't, now you mention it! I guess there ain't a thing wrong with it."

THE END

With an election coming up, the crooked bosses of Destiny-town needed a newspaper, and the red-headed, itinerant editor of The Traveler vowed he would give it to them—even if the first edition had to carry his own obituary!

Darrow would shoot a man and never change expression. And he was ready to do that right now.

Boothill's Election Extra

By FREMONT WARD

DESTINY was the hub of Mountain County, in the high Dragoons, and the blatantly impressive red brick courthouse wasn't calculated to let a man forget it.

That was Trask Warren's first impression as he halted his sagging, old, covered freight wagon beneath a muslin banner stretched between two weathered false fronts bordering Apache Street. The banner advised all who could read that election time was less than a week away and that all votes should be cast to re-elect Hawk Darrow, Sheriff of Mountain County.

Old Ink Andrews, on the wagon seat beside Trask, parted his drooping gray mustache and spat luxuriously into the dust of the street. "Red," he said cheerfully, "it kinda looks to me like we've hit town about the right time. If we can git shop set up in time we ought to pick off some nice political ads for *The Traveler's* fust issue. Pervidin'—" he cast a pained glance at his young companion "—you don't back some dead-hoss candidate."

Trask looked at his old partner, and his saddle-hued face was sober. "This time," he promised, "we'll lay right down alongside the Devil. I'm tired of backin' lost causes with nothing stronger than printers' ink!"

Townspeople ambling along the board-walks goggled at the sign stenciled on the old wagon's flapping tilt:

THE TRAVELER
A Weekly Newspaper for Old and Young

Others were studying the occupants of the wagon seat. They were seeing a flame-haired man in the late twenties, with a stubborn jaw and lank, hungry-looking body. They were also eyeing his companion, a sad-faced, scrawny little cuss who looked more like a barkeep down on his luck than a printer.

In part, their surmise was correct. *The Traveler's* editor and compositor were definitely down on their luck. They hadn't even had time to collect advertising bills due and payable before leaving booming Tombstone, one wagon length ahead of an irate mob of toughs, tinhorns, and outlaws who didn't believe a newspaper had any right to side a minority favoring law and order.

The same thing had happened in other frontier towns, Trask reflected wryly, and it was time it stopped. If he could make his red-headed temper behave here in Destiny, they might be able to rechristen *The Traveler,* and call it the *Old Settler,* or something like that—something peaceful and permanent.

Yes, this was a nice town and it looked prosperous. Trask relaxed and drew a deep breath. Then it whooshed out of his lungs, as something red, fuming like a miniature comet, passed across the line of his vision. It was a firecracker, and it lit accurately in the dust beneath the wheel mule's belly.

After that a number of things happened with furious rapidity. Trask glimpsed the face of the youngster who had thrown the cracker, and he had time to think that the boy didn't look like a prankster. He looked more like a person driven by desperation into an act he didn't want to commit. Then the firecracker exploded and four tired mules came to life with a buck-jumping lurch that careened the old wagon toward the hitch rail along the right side of the street. The mules headed straight for the ornate doors of the Mountain County courthouse.

Trask Warren sawed on the reins. A bronco across the street jerked free of its tie-rope and galloped madly up Apache Street. Somebody yelled, "Runaway!"

Ink Andrews clung to the seat rail, his ramhorn mustaches flying. "If I ever lay my hands on that pestiferous young'un, I'll blister his breeches!" he howled.

Trask had his hands too full to talk. It took him a half block to get the mules straightened out, and another half to get them halted. By the time the dust had cleared, most of Destiny's day-time population was milling around the wagon.

A tall man with a shiny silver star on the lapel of his cowhide vest came thrusting through the crowd, towing an ominously silent youngster by one ear. A brace of black Colts in cutaway holsters snugged the sheriff's thighs. He was taller than *The Traveler's* editor, and his hair was black as his guns. A thin, mirthless smile was on his narrow lips. He seemed to enjoy yanking the kid along.

Trask felt old Ink's shoulders nudge him. "The lanky cuss must be Hawk Darrow, but that warn't his name in Dodge. I seen him puncture two gents there so fast they didn't know they were dead till the undertaker called!"

Another man who had hurried up-street from the courthouse came bustling through the crowd. Trask noticed that Destiny's citizens made way for both of the men in an obvious hurry.

"So you got the young rascal, Hawk," the second man boomed. "That's fine! Fine! Damme, strangers, Destiny is right sorry to have you greeted by such a hellacious young jokester. We are indeed. My name is Shagg—Mortimer Shagg—county assessor, tax collector, and also mayor of our thriving community."

Trask grinned and reached down to shake hands with the mayor. "Mighty glad to know you, sir." He spoke loud enough for everybody to hear him. "Warren's my name, and this here pard of mine is Ink Andrews. As you can all see, we've brung a printin' press along with us, and if we can find the right kind of quarters

we're aimin' to give you folks the latest news right hot outa the fryin' pan."

The mayor's face was round and florid. It seemed to beam when he smiled. "Now that's great!" he exclaimed. "Ain't it, folks? The one thing Destiny lacks is a newspaper. Yes sirree, we sure can use one—particularly right now, with election time drawing nigh."

The sheriff and his young prisoner had halted alongside the mayor. The boy stood with his freckled face raised defiantly. He had brown eyes, about the same hue as Trask Warren's. Now they blazed up at *The Traveler's* editor.

Hawk Darrow had evidently taken his cue from the mayor. He smiled warmly and yanked at his prisoner's ear. "Glad to welcome you, Warren," he drawled. "What all you figure we ought to do with this young devil? You're the injured party, so I'll let you name the punishment."

Trask looked down at the youngster, and he tried to keep his expression stern. A brass band on hand to welcome them couldn't have done a better job of advertising *The Traveler* than the kid's firecracker.

"We might set a firecracker off under the seat of his pants," he said gravely. "Then again it might do him more good to sweat some. Me'n Ink are going to need a roustabout to help us get unloaded."

"Jest the thing!" Mayor Shagg chuckled. "Yes, sir, jest the thing! This young heller is Danny Cummings, from out on the plateau. His dad is runnin' ag'in Hawk here. Me, I always say, 'Like father like son!' When folks hear about this outrage, they'll think twice before switching their votes to an inexperienced rancher."

"They won't neither," Danny Cummings snapped back. "Leastways they know my pap is honest!"

"All right, all right," Mayor Shagg said hastily. "This isn't a political rally. We want to get these boys set up for business. To speed things I'm taking it on myself to offer you a rentfree building for your newspaper. Foller me right up the street, gents, and we'll have you settled quicker than a dog can shake hisself!"

At a walk approaching a trot, Mort Shagg started along the boardwalk. He was followed by the lean sheriff, and his reluctant prisoner whose feet dragged.

Trask looked at old Ink Andrews, one sandy eyebrow cocked. " 'Pear's like we're on the right side of the right people, for once," he murmured.

Ink's expression was less cheerful than usual as he answered his partner. "Take a look at the Destiny folks who've been spectators at this shindig," he said softly. "Dang it, some of them look like our comin' is an A-1 catastrophe. Others are grinnin' like Chessy cats. Blast it, I been wantin' to lay down alongside the Devil, on account of I'm gettin' too old and stove-up to ride this wagon much longer. But now I ain't so sure. Darrow's a hawk, and that's the truth. And this cuss Shagg. He reminds me of somethin' you'd find crawlin' under rocks. Red, mebbe we better turn around and sashay out of this town. I don't want my destiny tuh be boothill!"

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TRASK WARREN had the same hunch, but he also had a newsman's curiosity. "Time enough later to do that," he reasoned in quiet tones. "Right now I'm plumb interested in having a talk with that button. He didn't want to throw no 'cracker under our mules, but he did it just the same. I'm aiming to find out why. Another reason we're going to stay in Destiny is because we ain't got enough dinero to feed ourselves, let alone the hay-burners."

The building Mayor Shagg was offering them stood near the head of Apache Street. A squat, single-story adobe with a heavy floor and plenty of storage room, it looked ideal.

"Couldn't be better if you'd done built it for us," Ink Andrews chuckled. He seemed to have lost his fear of the situation.

"Any little favors we can do to repay you for this are yours to name," Trask told the mayor. The words were hard to get out. It was the first time red-headed Trask Warren had ever offered anybody favors.

The mayor laughed. "Just don't pay attention to whatever truck that young'un may spill into your ears," he drawled.

Trask nodded, and he found that he

was hating himself more all of the time. "I won't listen," he told the mayor.

Mort Shagg's eyes were the same gray as the steely-hued suit he was wearing They bored into the redhead's face for a minute. Then he nodded. "Looks like mebbe we're going to understand each other," he said coolly. "We'll see you get a nice reception from the merchants. Won't we, Hawk?"

"It'll be easy," the sheriff murmured. "Easy!"

Trask watched them stroll back down the slanting street. At the first alley, he saw the sheriff turn off. It might mean something and it might not. Shrugging, he turned to the side of the adobe where Ink had backed the wagon. A glance showed him they hadn't started to unload yet. The sight tightened the frown on Trask's forehead. Danny Cummings and the old printer were sitting on the open tail-gate, dangling their heels and talking.

"Come here, Red," Ink called tightly.

Trask stopped in front of them, and the expression on the printer's seamed face told him plainer than words that once more old Ink was set to back another lost cause. He drew a deep breath. "Tell," he invited quietly.

"We're pullin' out," Andrews growled. "Dad blast it, I'll feel like a skunk the rest of my life if we stay here and throw in with that cussed Shagg and Darrow!"

The old pattern was repeating itself. "We were the hombres," Trask reminded wryly, "who were aimin' to lay down alongside the Devil."

"These cusses could give the Devil a straight flush, and beat him with a royal," Ink growled. "Listen to Danny's story of what's going on around here, and you'll see what I mean."

"Mebbe, but there's one thing I don't savvy. You talk about pullin' out. And Danny tried to wreck us right off. I've always figgered a newspaper got in its licks by printin', not running!"

"Danny will give you the answer to that, too," Ink growled again.

Trask fixed his gaze on the youngster. The boy's overalls were too big for him. So were his boots, and gray work shirt. The clothes looked like hand-me-downs. They didn't fit the picture of the son of a prosperous rancher running for sheriff.

Danny Cummings grinned stiffly at the tall redhead. "I know what you're thinking," he said in a voice old and tight beyond his years. "These clothes ain't much, and neither is my dad's C-Cross any more. 'Tween rustlers whittlin' our herds and Mort Shagg settin' a tax rate that nobody can meet, we're nigh desperate. Everybody out on the plateau figgers Shagg and Darrow are behind the rustlin'. They keep a crew of border Mexicans hanging around town here that spend most of their day-times sleeping and night-times riding. We cain't prove nothing and it wouldn't do a bit of good if we could, long as Darrow rides the law-saddle.

"That's one reason all the folks out on the plateau got together and decided to run my dad ag'in Darrow. Lem Saunders, our neighbor, is up ag'in Shagg for assessor and tax collector. If we loose, we'll all be done for. Some of our crowd have already had to sell chunks of their spreads to pay taxes. And you know who does the buying?"

"I can guess," Trask said quietly.

Young Danny nodded. "Shagg. He taxes us to hell an' gone and then uses our money to buy us out!"

"Ain't that a scheme, though?" Ink Andrews demanded.

Trask nodded. "One issue of *The Traveler*," he said thoughtfully, "might point out the situation to county voters."

"You'll never get the chance to put in a word favoring us." Danny Cummings' voice was dry as ashes. "That's why I tried to wreck your rig with that 'cracker."

"And that's why we're going to pull right out of this danged town," Ink said wrathfully. "Big Dan Cummings and this Saunders have got a chance of winnin' with a word of mouth campaign, but none whatever if Shagg and Darrow get the opportunity to plaster the county with a sheet singin' their praises to the sky."

As the old printer talked, Trask had swung his eyes along the alley toward the front of the adobe. What he saw stiffened him involuntarily. Four dark-faced border breeds were lounging against the falsefront directly across the street. Double-gunned, cat-lean man, the menace of them was plain.

Trask was swinging back to the pair on the tail-gate when beneath the wagon his eyes sighted a pair of boots at the off front wheel. He recognized them instantly. They were Darrow's. The sheriff had slipped back to overhear their conversation.

Brown eyes hard, Trask tried to flash Ink and the boy a silent signal as he hastily changed the words his lips had been about to frame.

"Don't sound so plumb self-righteous, pard," he said coolly. "The situation ain't no worse than we've seen before. Only thing is we've always made the mistake of sidin' down-and-outers like this button's dad, and all it's ever got us is grief. Well, I'm tired of running. This time we stay put and climb aboard the gold train with Shagg and Darrow!"

Ink hadn't caught the sign in Trask's eye. He looked at the redhead like a man suddenly discovering bitter salts in a nice clear pool. Then he turned and slipped his arm around the boy's shoulders.

"Son," his old voice choked, "I've rid many a mile with this redheaded cuss, and this is the fust time I ever found snake in his make-up. You go on along. We ain't going to need you to help unload our gear, on account of we ain't stayin' here—leastways, I ain't!"

Trask balled his knobby fists. He had to carry this farce through now. "You're going to get this wagon unloaded," he said threateningly. "After I'm organized you can go to hell, Ink. It won't be the first time I've set type single-handed!"

Hawk Darrow swung into view around the end of the wagon. A smile marked his sallow face. "You talk the kind of lingo I like to hear, Warren," he drawled. "Just happened to catch your speech as I doubled back to tell yuh Shagg is sendin' carpenters and swampers up to help you get set to publish. Some more of the boys are rustlin' ads and news for you."

Trask kept his face expressionless. "That's mighty nice," he said. "We sure appreciate your interest!"

The sheriff turned his eyes toward Ink. "You weren't serious about leaving Warren in the lurch, were you, Andrews?" His voice was silky.

The usually garrulous old printer looked from Trask to the sheriff and gulped. "Why—why, I guess I was just blowin'." He gave young Danny Cummings a shove that sent him off the tail-gate. "Go on, younk," he added violently. "Get out of here. Go tell your dad he ain't going to win no election. Kids like you are always a blabbing nuisance!"

Trask was watching the boy out of the corner of his eye, wondering just how much Danny had divined from their talk and the sheriff's appearance. He wonwered if the boy could understand that they and *The Traveler* were virtual prisoners. But young Danny's face told him nothing.

The kid stood there rubbing a bumped elbow. Then his eyes filled with hot tears. "You've just been pumping me," he said finally. "Dang the whole rotten, dirty bunch of yuh! My dad will still win!" He turned blindly and stumbled around the rear of the adobe.

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SHERIFF Darrow watched the boy disappear and he seemed satisfied. He rubbed his bony hands together and looked at Trask. "That's that," he chuckled. "Well, I'm glad you got everything straight. Let's get busy and move your gear inside . . ."

For a man who liked to talk, Ink Andrews was a very silent helper the rest of the afternoon.

But he had plenty to say that night when he and Trask were finally alone in *The Traveler's* new office. Now that they were settled, Ink parted his mustache carefully and stabbed tobacco juice at the bright new cuspidor donated by one of the two local hardware dealers. There was a twinkle fighting with worry in his faded eyes.

Not only badge-toters had the gun-savvy to bring law to wild towns, as this story so dramatically shows. Sometimes even fugitives like Salvation Sam McGee faced such deadly jobs—as witness "Smoky Salvation for Hang-Town Sinners," Tom Roan's big novel in the current STAR WESTERN. Buy it today!

"You got more guts, Red Warren," he said, "than a Gov'ment Injun agent robbin' redskins oughta their rations. Why, dang it, you been actin' most of the afternoon like a man enjoyin' hisself."

Trask was relaxing in a new swivel chair behind a new oak roll-top that had been one of Mayor Shagg's presents. At the printer's words he smiled slightly. "Shagg and Darrow want a newspaper. They're going to get it—and so are those poor hombres out on the plateau, fighting to make an honest town of Destiny. That's why I've been pushing hard to get set for work. We're going to press tonight on the *Dragoon Advocate!* We'll put out two papers—one for each side—but the ranchers' sheet will come first."

"Jumpin' Jehosephat!" Ink Andrews was out of his chair like a man pricked with a thorn. "I never thought o' that! An' we can do it! We'll rip the hides off Darrow and Shagg and hang 'em up on a bob-wire fence to dry! Where's my type-stick? We're going to press!"

"On *The Traveler,* yes!" The voice was flat. So was the click of the cocking gun that accompanied it.

The sound held Trask motionless. His back was toward the door that led into the dark storeroom behind the office. The thought whipped through his mind that he himself had bolted the outside door leading into the storeroom.

"You forgot the cellar." Hawk Darrow came stepping into the light as Trask swung out of the swivel chair.

Darrow held a Colt canted in his right hand. "Mort didn't think a visit would be necessary," he said. "He figured you were talking the truth when you said you were going to throw in with us after listenin' to the kid. But me, I figured mebbe you'd seen my boots behind the wagon."

Trask had to admire the cool, callousness of the lawman. Darrow was nobody's fool. He would shoot a man and never change expression.

Trask returned the stare. "I saw your boots," he agreed. "I also spotted your four gunnies across the street. They were enough to tell me *The Traveler* was here to stay—until you were ready to let us go."

Hawk Darrow nodded. He seemed pleased. "You're tough. And you talk straight. I like you, Warren. We can go a long way together."

"And I'll get a one-way ticket to Boothill if I won't print what you want."

"You're still talking straight, Warren," Darrow said. "Boothill—or gold-lined jeans. Which'll it be?"

It was with a sense of solid shock that Trask realized the sheriff was ready to shoot him as he stood there. And a dead editor could never elect honest officials.

"You said something about going to press on *The Traveler* tonight," he temporized.

Darrow seemed to take for granted Trask Warren's acceptance of partnership. "That's right. I'm rushing you on this because my Mex hands have got a lot of riding to do to distribute copies to all the county voters."

Trask's chest suddenly felt tight. He sat down, picked up a pencil. "Shoot," he said quietly.

"You better banner this in headlines six inches deep across the top of the sheet." Again Darrow seemed to be enjoying himself. "It's news that'll knock the socks right off every cuss who even thought of votin' for Cummings and Saunders. It'll knock their socks off, boys, because I'm headin' a posse that will arrest them come morning!"

Trask blinked. He hadn't expected anything quite like this. "Why?" he blurted.

Hawk Darrow was smiling. "If I can surprise you boys, we won't have any trouble with the rest of the folks," he drawled. "I'll tell you why we're arrestin' them, and you can put it in the right kind of language when you write it. We're bringin' in Cummings and Saunders because, between you and me, my hands have planted enough stolen beef on their places to make it look like they're the ring-leaders of the rustler bunch that has been hounding the plateau. 'Tween jailin' 'em, and having a newspaper to back us, me'n Mort and the rest of our friends in the courthouse oughtn't to have much trouble winning ourselves an election."

Trask drew a deep breath. "That's right, Sheriff," he said softly. "You won't have a bit of trouble."

"The papers will be called for here about dawn," Darrow said crisply. "Package 'em in fifties and twenty-fives. A

four-page sheet is enough. Now after election," his voice turned persuasive, "there'll be a gold mine here for you boys, providin' you don't get no more high-falutin' notions. Meantime, you ain't going to be alone much—if you savvy what I mean."

The door closed behind Sheriff Darrow. Trask did not even look up. His pencil was busy on a block of newsprint.

Old Ink Andrews looked at *The Traveler's* redheaded editor and grumbled, "Well, what in hell you writin'? You ain't going to play that cuss's game, are you? Blast it, your idea of doing a sheet called the *Dragoon Advocate* was so good it just couldn't work out, I guess. But we've got to do something. We can't set here knowin' Danny's dad is goin' to be arrested on trumped charges."

Trask had found the chink in the solid wall of opposition Darrow had built. His brown eyes were narrowed to slits when he looked up at his old printer. He shoved a sheet of newsprint across the new desk. "Read," he said explosively. "The *Advocate* idea will still work—if we're lucky. Read it, pard, and then start setting type. I'd hate to have a kid like Danny Cummings figure us for a pair of skunks."

Ink Andrews started to read, and his faded eyes started to snap. "Red," he said huskily, "you're signin' our death warrant. Boy, you can't print stuff like this."

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"BOX it page one, center," Trask ordered grimly. He ran his fingers through flame-red hair already touseled.

"But it's an open letter to the Governor of the Territory!" Ink sputtered. "And —and you're tellin' Danny's story, and how we're nothing but a couple of damned prisoners here in Destiny. You're telling about the dirty, rotten tax and land-grabbing situation out on the plateau. Why, blue blazes and hell, you're even namin' names! Darrow. Shagg. You ain't satisfied with asking the folks of Mountain County to wake up and put decent citizens in office. You're calling on the Governor to invite Federal judges here to investigate the situation!

"Gosh, a'mighty, Red, how in hell you going to get anything like this out of the office? Darrow's own riders will be distributing these papers. He'll likely look 'em over hisself afore they go out."

Trask glanced up. Concentration had beaded his forehead with fine sweat. His eyes were the hard brown of agate. "Darrow's a penny pincher," he bit out. "He hires Mexes to do his riding because he can get 'em cheap. There ain't one in fifty of that breed can read gringo talk. And I'm gambling we get the papers bundled with a spare copy of what Darrow *wants to see* spread right on top of each package. He'll let it go at that. If he doesn't—"

"We won't be chased out of this town," Ink said soberly. "We'll be in Boothill. Even if you do put it across, Darrow will plug us just for spite before he and his bunch dust it!"

There was truth in the old printer's words. But Trask had quit counting odds. "Let's hash the rest of this stuff together and get rolling," he said harshly. "If this is *The Traveler's* last edition, we'll make it a fighting one!"

The hours until midnight ticked by. No one came in to disturb them, though the shadow of guards kept passing and repassing the curtainless front windows.

Trask paid no attention. He was too busy sorting and rewriting the miscellaneous items brought in by local townspeople, and adding impressions of his own. He was making *The Traveler's* last issue a paper a man could take pride in producing.

An hour before dawn the four-page sheet was off the press and packaged. There were copies for Darrow and his henchmen to peruse on the counter. And the first half dozen copies inside each bundle carried the headline and story on the rustler roundup Sheriff Hawk Darrow was planning. The rest painted the true picture for Mountain County voters.

Destiny was going to be in for a shock when its citizens started comparing issues! Trask was thinking that when the front door cracked open. Darrow and Mayor Shagg came inside and moved to the counter.

The sheriff leafed through one of the still wet copies on the counter. When he was finished, he nodded. "Nice, Warren," he said. "Damned nice!"

"Yes, indeed it is," the mayor echoed. "I knew you boys would come through for us. We'll have these pestiferous troublemakers from the plateau in jail before noon. The voters won't forget that. They will show their faith in us—and you. Oh, we won't forget you, Warren! A little misunderstanding sometimes just serves to cement a friendship."

"Hell," Hawk Darrow cut in, "you don't have to make a speech here! The boys will be along directly to pick up the papers, Warren," he added. "Meanwhile, I'll have the Chink send you some breakfast."

Trask felt the tension running out of his muscles. "We'll eat it," he promised.

Riders had come to a halt outside, and now the four gun-hung Mex breeds Trask had seen before came crowding in.

Darrow gave them a quick glance. "On the counter," he said. "You know your routes. Don't let any moss grow under your feet."

The Mexicans trooped to pick up the papers. One of the quartette evidently had primed himself with an overdose of tequilla. Trask watched the man fumble bundles into his arms. He caught an extra one by the twine binding it, and jerked it from the board. Trask saw the knot Ink's tired fingers had tied come free. Wrappings parted. Like giant white moths, papers floated floorward. Headlines that told a different story from the one Hawk Darrow had read glared blackly in the gray dawn light.

Trask watched the sheriff's eyes widen on what he was seeing. For a second the man's face was tipped toward the floor. It was all the time they'd get. Trask realized that the same thought was in Ink Andrew's mind, for he saw the old printer grab a loaded stick of type, as he quit his own chair and reached for a setting maul. It made him want to laugh. A type-stick and maul against six Colt-crazy killers—

Hawk Darrow was straightening. Face twisted into a mask of rage, he turned, hands forking toward low-hung weapons. "Damn you, I told you we—"

Ink Andrews was going through the narrow opening in the counter, loaded type-stick raised like a club in his hand. There wasn't room for both of them in the narrow passage. Trask saw that, and made his leap for the counter top.

Six feet two of red-headed desperation, he flung his maul at Darrow. He saw the mallet catch the lawman in the chest. It staggered him backward as his guns spouted at the crouched editor.

Trask felt lead sear beneath his arm. He saw Shagg, squealing like a fat pig and trying to jerk a sleeve gun, go down under the swinging type-stick in old Ink's hand. Then Trask was launching himself through space at the befuddled Mex who was still blinking stupidly down at the papers he had scattered about the floor. The man seemed to realize his danger. He tried to move, but Trask's falling weight hit him, crushed him to the floor. He had the Mex's Colt clear of holster leather, when a swinging boot caught him above the ear.

Through a red mist, Trask spotted the face of another of the Mex riders. His borrowed Colt blasted the man backward before he could launch another kick. And yet that blow must have done something to his brain, he realized, for now there were more men in *The Traveler's* new office—men he had never seen before, wind-burned ranchers tired of fighting a losing battle for an honest cause.

Hawk Darrow's gun spouted flame at him again, and Trask felt the Mex pinned beneath him shudder as lead entered his body. He saw his own slug lift a splinter from the counter alongside the sheriff, and then a solid wall of men were coming between them. They knocked the Colts from Darrow's hands, and pinioned him.

Wiry young arms were trying to lift Trask. A boyish bass that broke into a treble shrilled in his ear: "Made it in time, by gum! That Darrow, he ain't the only smart jigger in Destiny. I beat him to the basement by a mile, and I was settin' listenin' to all his talk to yuh about how he was goin' to arrest my dad for rustlin' . . . . Took a little time to get the word spread around, pard, but we come as soon as we could."

Trask gained his feet dizzily. "Son," he said huskily, "you've won yourself a place on the payroll. *The Traveler* can't lose with you for its star reporter."

Three mounted men made a sortie from the train but were smashed back.

DEATH NAMES A WAGON-MASTER

By ROLLAND LYNCH

Scout Chris Matlock damned John Strong as a make-believe trail god and tyrant. Then Kiowa arrows dropped the West-bound Conestoga train's wagon-master, gave Chris a new job—and taught him a lesson in manhood that came from beyond the grave!

WITH the Cimarron Crossing behind and the *Jornada del Muerte* —Journeyway of the Dead— ahead, everyone was uneasy. Dodge City had warned that the Kiowas were on the prowl out here. The drivers of the wagons were keeping the gaps closed. Ox nose to tail gate, ox nose to tail gate.

The sky was filling with clouds, white-edged dark things with sagging bellies that tumbled and backed into one another and were now and then rent with livid flashes. Some men muttered that this ominous display was a warning and looked anxiously at their soiled and rotting canvas Conestoga tops. The wind picked up the *Jornada's* loose sand and sent clouds of it this way and that. Drivers and outriders choked on it despite the neckerchiefs drawn over their noses.

Outriding the train at two hundred yards, Scout Chris Matlock was complaining to the meat-fetcher. Chris was young, with blonde shaggy hair that had yet to grow to frontier length. The skin of his face had many suns to see before curing

the color of saddle leather. But he knew a lot. Most young scouts do.

"I don't see why John has to rawhide me all the time," he said, with a touch of heat. "What if I forgot to have the lead horses shod last night? You'd have thought it meant death to the whole train."

"He likes to stroke a fella's fur the wrong way," the meat-fetcher said dourly. He was still angered over the bawling out of yesterday, when he had brought in an antelope shot through the heart instead of the head. Wagon Master John Strong was too damn particular.

Chris nodded with sympathetic warmth. "Every time something goes wrong his jaw comes unhinged," he said. "Always saying, 'You've got to be born to the buckskin trade. If the trail isn't in your blood you better take up gambling or storekeeping.' Personally, I think he should have been a sky-pilot. Preaching all the time." Chris stood in his stirrups and scouted the horizon with his gray eyes. The sun was a burnished ball low in the west. The oncoming clouds rolled across it and blotted it out. John Strong rode up.

"I thought I told you personally before the stretch-out call this morning to look over Jed Marker's wagon," he snapped at Chris. "And to get the jingler to fix it if anything was wrong."

"I looked it over," Chris said sharply. "I didn't think it needed work."

John Strong hit the pommel of his saddle with a calloused palm. "Then think again. His right front wheel just worked off and spilled his house goods all over the ground. Lucky no one was hurt."

"Yes," Chris agreed.

"And did you see to putting the marker over Aaron Miller's grave last night after the rituals?"

"I did."

"Then why didn't you enter the date of death, the cause and the place of burial in my book?" Strong asked acridly.

Chris' sun burned face colored still more. "I—I forgot."

"Forgot," the wagon-master spat, disgustedly. "A few more lapses of memory and you'll be hitting the back-trail, as far as I'm concerned. If you're not born to the buckskin trade the trail isn't in your blood. It's the little things that must be done before big ones are accomplished. Get back along the line now and turn 'em in. Or do I have to do everything myself?"

Chris reined away sharply and galloped toward the line of wagons.

Strong turned to the meat-fetcher. "How are our supplies?" he asked. "We got enough to see us over this hell strip?"

"I don't think so," the hunter calculated slowly.

"Think?" John Strong echoed. "Then why are you riding with my scout? Get out there and sight something." He waved his hand toward the undulating expanse. "Game won't jump into your saddle bag, mister."

The meat-fetcher reined toward the oncoming storm with his spurs digging savagely into his mount's flanks.

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WAGON-MASTER John Strong watched the two men ride away while the strain of his command seemed suddenly to make his shoulders sag. This was dangerous country. One mistake was all you ever got a chance to make. There were a hundred people—men, women and children—in the forty wagons. The wagons were piled high with house goods and slow to handle. That's why the little things counted so much; why a man had to be born to the buckskin trade to see them. The headdress that looked like brush on the horizon line, the silhouette that disappeared as quickly as it appeared, the faint track in the shifting sands. That's what you had to see. These were the things that kept a man living in this country. If you weren't born to the trade you wouldn't see them; if you neglected the little chores you wouldn't pay any attention to the minute signs that meant disaster. Chris Matlock had the makings of a good man, but he was careless about the little things. Well, they counted, too. With a curse, he turned back toward the circling wagons.

A mile back of the place where the square was forming, Chris Matlock tossed a water cask back into Jed Marker's wagon and swore to the bearded jingler. "Strong thinks I'm to scout and be right Johnny-on-the-spot to put my shoulder

under an axle when a wheel comes off," he brayed. "I wish his horse would step on his neck."

"He's a hard man, Matlock," the jingler said as he drove the wedge that made Marker's wagon wheel secure again.

"Hard isn't the half of it," Chris went on. "You'd think he was freighting solid gold." He would have said more, but the first drops of rain began falling and called for feverish work.

There were no fires this night. The clouds scudded, low-flung, across the sky and whipped the train with its rain. The wind came steadily out of the north, now, and soon rose to gale proportions. Rivulets crept along the ground and swelled into washes. There was no rest. Canvas tops were rent and blown away and new ones had to be rigged. Chris slogged through the downpour, cursing the helpless pilgrims and John Strong. When the night murk began to lighten with the coming of day, he sought a place to rest—and bumped squarely into the wagon-master.

"Ride a circle, Matlock," John Strong ordered. "Don't miss any signs."

Chris turned to give him an argument. There was little danger of Indians in this kind of weather. And if there was, how could a man read sign? Visibility was less than a hundred yards. Strong knew that. This was just one of the little things by which he abided. Why couldn't he let Chris lie down for just a moment and get the fatigue and chill from his bones? Chris lost his chance for argument, for John Strong turned his back and strode away.

Chris saddled up and rode his route. The rain was a curtain defying penetration. It got into your eyes when you looked up, blotted all tracks you could look down at. Shaking with weariness and anger, he returned to the train. He lit down and stared. The wagons were being readied to roll.

"He can't do this," Chris swore to the meat-fetcher. "We should stay here and make a permanent camp until this is over."

"He wants to make Chico Springs." The meat-fetcher shook his head. "Hell, we're liable to lose our way in this stuff."

"He'll blame me for that," Chris said dourly. "Riding out looking for sign in this kind of weather . . ."

John Strong strode up. He was a bedraggled, weary, in his soaked buckskins.

"What kind of a council is this?" he snapped. "Matlock, when the train's building to stretch out, I told you to ride the *rim*."

"This weather—" Chris began.

"To hell with the weather. With any luck we'll be in Chico Springs in a few days. Roofs and dry beds for these people." He turned to the meat-fetcher. "What in hell do you mean, standing here nursing your pipe, when you should be out on the other rim? Get into the saddle!"

John Strong scrubbed his hands against his soaked buckskin jerkin, turned and watched the train get ready. This was miserable. The ground was reaching the saturation point and would soon be sucking at the wheels of the Conestogas. It would be tough getting to Chico Springs. Wagons would have to be pulled out of the mire. Roaring creeks would have to be chanced. But the people needed warmth. Everyone was wet to the bone. If they didn't get shelter and heat they might take down with something. Already some of them were sniffling with colds. The lines around his eyes deepened. There was always the threat of Kiowa attack.

When the stretch-out cry ran the length of the train, John Strong rode to the front to guide them. As per his orders, Chris and the meat-fetcher converged on him to report. They had seen nothing.

John Strong said his first human words of the trip. "Perhaps I've asked too much," he muttered. "No one could read sign in this weather."

Chris and the meat-fetcher looked at each other.

The three rode in silence for long moments. Suddenly a muted roar ahead sent them spurring on. They stopped on the edge of a debris-filled wash. It was a hundred yards across. There was no telling how deep.

"We'll have to turn up-country a ways," John Strong shouted above the storm. "Matlock, ride back and warn the wagons."

Chris had it on the tip of his tongue to say, "We should camp here and not try to cross. If there's Kiowas about this would be the place they'd strike." But he held his tongue and wheeled his mount. And for not hesitating, his life was spared.

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HE WAS a hundred feet away from Strong and the meat-fetcher when the Indians boiled out of the murk. Their cries sheered above the sound of the storm. Chris wheeled to go back and help, but he saw John Strong and the meat-fetcher go down—riddled with arrows. Reining his mount sharply, he galloped toward the wagons, his voice raised harshly.

"Turn in! Turn in! Kiowas!"

The Indians were breathing down the back of his neck when he made the first wagon. John Strong had drilled his people well. The Conestogas were already forming a semi-circle to the band. There was no time to make a complete square. Three mounted men made a sortie from the train but were smashed back.

It was a nightmare to Chris. He fired at glistening coppery bodies until his pistol was empty. Then he was in the thick of them, clubbing with his gun barrel and slashing with his skinning knife.

The train was a bedlam of shrieks and curses, abetted by the storm sounds, the spiteful spat of shots and the sickening sound of humming arrows *chocking* into flesh. Finally, with a yell of frustration, the Indians retreated.

The jingler came running up, his face ashen. "They're gone," he babbled. "Both of 'em. They went just like that." He slapped his palms together. "For God's sake, what we going to do?"

Chris leaned heavily against a wagon wheel. The full realization that he was leader was with him now. His stomach hollowed out and his heart seemed to stop beating. His responsibilities showered down on him and he had to grab the wagon side to keep from going to his knees. Someone else had always given the orders. Now he had to give them.

"I guess," he said slowly, "we should gather up our dead."

The lightning flashed and etched the jingler's set and rigid face. Chris got hold of himself. "Move!" he said sharply. "Get these wagons into a square. . . ."

The man nodded and slogged stupidly off. Chris went out, brought John Strong and the meat-fetcher's bodies back and put them under the lead wagon.

The wagons were in a tight square and the pilgrims were gathered and awaiting him. He spoke to them slowly. "Marker, you're my scout," he said. "Saddle up and ride the rim. You've done some trapping in your day and you know some of the signs. You're the only one in the train born to the buckskin." He paused.

"Carter, you're a good shot. You'll be meat-fetcher. Get out and see what you can bring in. Don't stand there. Both of you move!"

When the two had turned away to carry out his orders, he spoke again to the rest. "Get shovels and begin digging. The women can prepare the bodies for burial. You, Botwick and Mason, see that the powder is dry and placed at convenient places. There's no telling if the band will come back. Jump!"

Chris was never certain how he got through the long day. He made the death entries in John Strong's book—cause and time and place. Men came and asked his advice and he gave it, although he was never sure what he had said. He stood over the shallow graves, head bared, and read a short passage out of the Scripture for each. He clapped a downcast man's back and put a comforting arm about a sobbing woman's shoulders. And when it was done he went to the lead wagon and stretched out. This was the first time he had been off his feet or out of a saddle for forty-eight hours.

Despite physical and emotional fatigue, he could not rest. How were things going around the camp? Those thousand and one little things people were liable to overlook. Botwick and Mason came to him, with Botwick saying, "Half the powder is useless, Matlock. Too wet."

"You tell me it's too wet?" Chris flared. "Knock off some dry braces from under a wagon and build a fire. Dry it out. And don't come to me with a little problem like that again."

The jingler came next. "The water wagon was tipped over," he said, "in the hurry to turn in. We ain't got no drinkin'."

"Fool," Chris spat. "There's enough in the air for a million throats. Spread some tarpaulins and run it into barrels. If one person goes thirsty I'll hold you personally responsible. Or do I have to do these little things myself?"

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RESTLESSLY, Chris crawled from the wagon into the sodden rain. There was too much to be done for him to rest. His face was seamed with worry. A woman clutched at his arm.

"It's my husband," she pleaded. "His shoulder was laid open by a tomahawk. I've done the best I could. You'd better come see him."

"I'm no doc—" Chris broke off short. "Which way?" he asked gently.

He got out John Strong's medical kit and followed the woman. He found the man's flesh opened to the bone. He got out a needle and thread and had the woman hold the man's hands. The man was unconscious when Chris was done.

"He'll be all right," he told the woman. "When the flesh gets to knitting, let me know and I'll pull the stitches out."

He went to where the men were huddled around the tiny fire built to dry the powder. "We're stretching out," he told them. Get 'em ready."

"We haven't enough oxen," said the jingler. "Some were killed and others lamed."

"Then get them out of the way," Chris thundered. "Fasten one wagon to another and put the extra head of oxen to the lead one. Haven't I got men who'll attend to these little things—" He stopped, looked around at the group. "Do the best you can. We've got to move."

As the men turned to obey, Chris went to the lead wagon. He knocked off a couple of strakes and fashioned a crude cross. He sharpened one end of it. Then he carved a name and tribute.

He went alone through the rain to a fresh mound that was already eroding from water. He put the cross at the head of the mound and stepped back to read it. He bared his head and murmured the inscription aloud, "John Strong. Born to the Buckskin Trade.

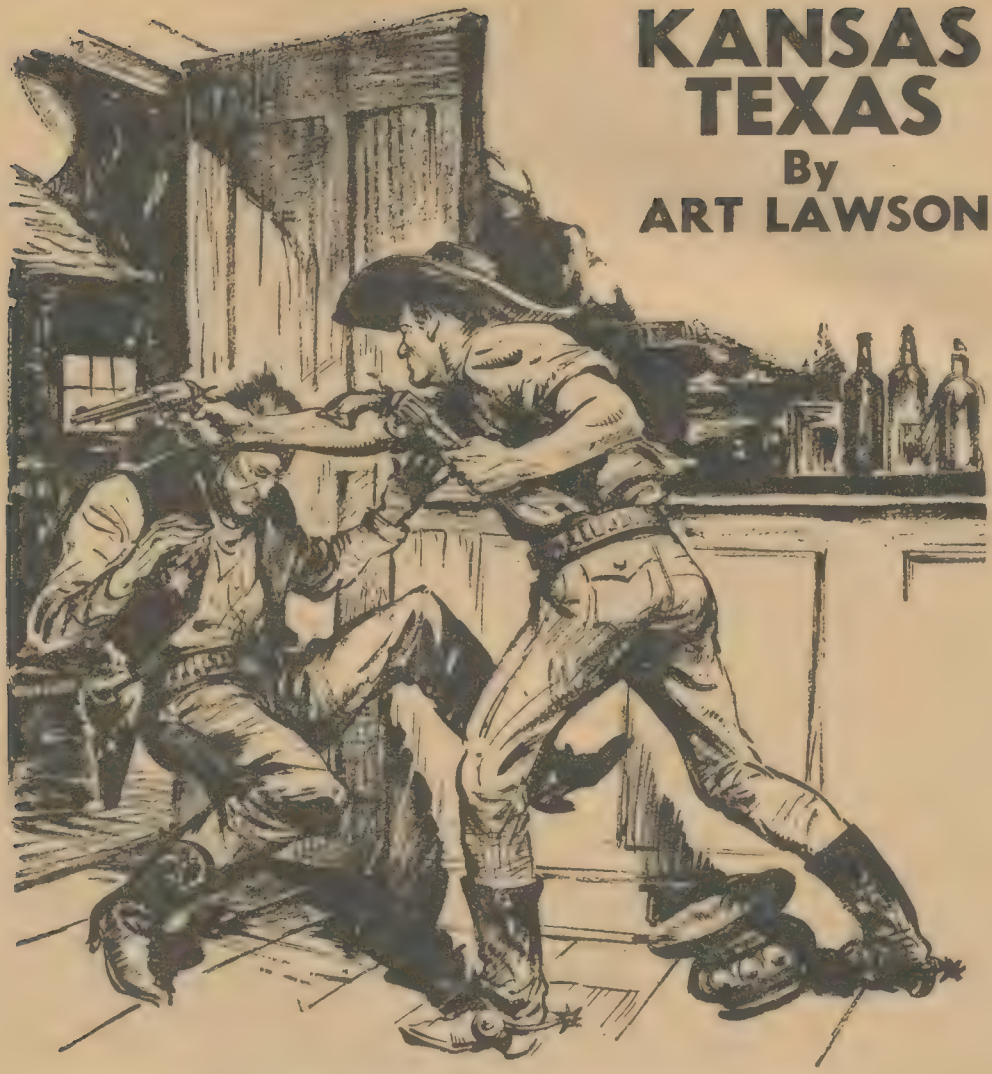
"If they every say that about me, John Strong, I'll be a very proud man."

He turned, then, back toward the train. His voice rolled through the storm sounds. "Catch up. Stretch out. Chico Springs or bust."

He had to get these people to cover. They were in his charge and might take down with something. He had to see how Jed Marker was scouting and if Carter was bringing in some meat. There were a thousand and one little things to be attended to, and the responsibility was his.

KANSAS TEXAS

By ART LAWSON



Bill . . . knocked the marshal into oblivion with his own weapon.

A hard-hitting novelette of a Texan's battle against tough Kansas law

A frame-up stampede of crazy-mad Texas steers to the railroad pens at Longhorn City would win Drover Bill Hawkins close to fifty thousand dollars, if he could run the gantlet of granger rifle fire, to the trail's-end rendezvous where four tinhorn Kansas politicians waited to pay him off—with a ton of leaden hell!

LAW FOR DROVERS

CHAPTER ONE

Straight Flush—in Skunks!

BILL HAWKINS was doing the talking. He usually kept his mouth shut and his ears open, but tonight he was telling the boys gathered in the Lone Star's back room just exactly what he intended doing, how he was going to do it, and when. He added that he would be very sorry if he found it necessary to resort to guns. He would be powerful unhappy. But if they chose guns—guns it would be.

"You're the sheriff," he said to Big Jim Kouse. "In the interests of preserving the peace you are going down to Crazy Creek to tell those grangers to get out of my way. I brought my herd clear from the Brazos—and I am not going to turn around when I'm only ten miles from the railroad."

Big Jim moved uneasily in his chair. He was careful to keep his elbows on the table, to hold his cigar in his right hand so that Bill Hawkins would have no occasion to expect gunplay. Big Jim, for all his beefy bulk, could pull a six-shooter with the best of them; but the legend of Bill Hawkins' speed had come up the trail ahead of him—and it was a potent story.

Big Jim was not alone at this meeting. He was flanked by his two friends, Slick Teal, marshal of Longhorn City, and Red Cobb, banker, railroad agent, and mayor. They were three against one; three with a plan. But they were not yet ready to resort to powder and lead. Their game was bigger than Bill Hawkins, and Bill was the meat with which they would bait, and maybe spring, their trap.

Big Jim drew deep on his cigar and watched the smoke rings rise to the draught of the kerosene lamp that hung from the ceiling above the four men. He

spoke slowly, taking his cue from the silence of the other two.

"I can't do that, Bill," he said. "The grangers elected me to be their sheriff. They put up a deadline to keep Texas fever out of their county. I got to help them enforce the law, and there's nothing else I can do about it."

Bill Hawkins spoke softly. He never raised his voice. Where he came from men listened even to his whispers. Up here in Kansas he reckoned they would do likewise. Though few years had passed since Bill was a kid, he had fought along the Texas frontier during the war, and up and down the trails ever since. Bill Hawkins' head was a lot older than his body, and Bill's guns commanded respect no matter what folks thought of his opinions.

"Then I reckon," he said, "that you'll have to get the grangers to change their law, mister—because I'm coming through regardless and we'd all be much happier if I done it peacefully."

"There's something mighty convincing in what he says," Red Cobb laughed. "I tell you what to do, Bill. Go over and see Preacher Tucker. He's sort of headman of that granger bunch. They come to him for advice. He's got them under his thumb, all right. Go talk to him, Bill."

"Maybe I better go with you," the marshal offered. "Some day some Texan is going to get mad at Preacher and shoot him. If it's going to be tonight, and you're the Texan, maybe I better be on hand, so to speak."

Bill got the hint. Nothing would make these three happier than to have Preacher Tucker killed. Each one of them owned big interests in Longhorn City—stockyards, honkatonks, banks. They would be ruined if the grangers kept the Texans below Crazy Creek."

"Okay." Bill pushed back his chair. He stood so tall the lampglow did not reach his face. "Then come on, Slicker. The rest of you want to come, too? Want to make sort of a committee of it?"

"Oh, no," Big Jim Kouse said hastily.

"The way I look at it is it ain't any of my affair," the railroad man said. "It's between you and the grangers, Bill. You bring in the beef and I'll have the cars waiting."

"How about the money?" Bill asked.

Red Cobb had agreed to buy his herd.

"I'll have that, too," Red said.

Bill shrugged. He turned his back on the townsmen and opened the door to the main barroom. Last year, when he trailed his beef to the yards, this place had been packed with Texans fresh from the trail. Tonight it was deserted except for the bartender and half a dozen short-skirted girls who smiled and fluttered mechanically when Bill appeared. He ignored them. With Slick Teal tagging along like a dog, Jim went out into Jackass Alley.

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THE Alley ran parallel to the railroad, connecting Depot Street with Texas Avenue. Like Texas Avenue, Jackass Alley was only a narrow, filthy road, lined with saloons, gambling houses, honkatonks, hock shops, cheap hotels and cafés. In the height of the trail season you were just as likely to find a dead man as a drunk lying in the gutter, and if you were not heavily armed and traveling with friends, the dead man would probably be yourself.

But Depot Street seemed to belong to a different town. Here the street was wider, though just as dusty, the buildings were bigger and the hotel cleaner. The single saloon was as quiet as the church that poked its tiny spire into the sky directly opposite it. Cottonwoods had been planted, and a brick bank was growing where prairie sod had been unbroken a short year ago.

Here your life was somewhat safer than in the back streets, and the men you met walked with the heavy pace of the farmer rather than the rolling gait of Texas cowboys.

Yet Bill felt uneasy as he strode along the boardwalk. He waited for Slick Teal to catch up with him.

"Slicker," he said, "you sure made a mighty peaceful town out of this. How'd you do it?"

"Nothing to it." Slicker had missed the irony in Bill's voice. "After the last marshal got shot the town put in a reform government. Me and Big Jim; also Red Cobb as mayor. We're holding down the lid, cowboy."

The feeling was growing within Bill that the peace of Longhorn City was about as false as Slick Teal's statement. Those three men could have been elected only with stuffed ballot boxes and, if they were holding down the lid it was only because they had something private cooking in the pot. Whatever it was, Bill could not guess, for the stew was too thick. He reckoned he would have to take a good, big mouthful to find out. So far he had only stirred it a little and gotten a sniff that he did not like. He started to cross the street to the church, but Slick held him back.

"This ain't Sunday," he said, "or Wednesday night. The Preacher's in here the rest of the time."

Wondering, Bill followed the little gunman into the Okay Saloon. Business was thriving. Drummers, a few railroad men, townsmen and farmers lined the bar. A lean, hawk-faced man waited on bar, assisted by the loveliest girl Bill had ever seen. Her flashing blue eyes and golden hair looked out of place here, as did the great sign stretched across the back mirror:

MODERATION IS A VIRTUE

Then he noticed other signs: *Think of your wife and Kiddies. Free Water—Try It.*

Bill asked, "What's the joke?"

"Ain't any," Slick Teal said, grinning crookedly. "Foller me."

He found an opening and bellied up to the bar. Bill took his place beside him, lifting one foot to the rail. The ratty little marshal winked at the girl. Bill thought her cheeks crimsoned as she hurried down to them.

"What will it be, Mister Teal?" she asked.

The softness of her voice struck Bill Hawkins with a curious impact. He found himself staring at her. It was Slick's answer that jolted him out of it.

"Couple whiskies, Miss Sally," the marshal said, "and yore old man. This Tejano wants to talk to him."

Her eyes met Bill's for only a moment. There was a fighting light in them. Then she turned away and sidled down the bar to speak to the hawk-faced man. He nodded, brought a bottle and a couple of glasses which he set before Slick and Bill.

"You wanted to see me," he said, when he had filled the glasses.

"You're this Preacher Tucker?" Bill asked.

"That's what they call me," Preacher said. "I've been expecting you." Before Bill could protest, Preacher went on: "The boys brought up word that they had stopped your cattle below the creek."

The coolness of the man annoyed Bill more than the obvious double-talk of the three hombres from Jackass Alley. He was used to their kind and knew how to handle them. But a bartender who turned preacher on Sunday was something new to him.

"I'm bringing my beef through, mister," Bill said explosively.

Preacher shook his head. "No," he said, "you're not."

Bill's eyes flamed. He gripped the edge of the bar with white-knuckled hands. He thought how he would be ruined if he could not deliver his herd. He would be wiped out, and the faithful crew that had trailed the beef north with him would be ruined as well. All the years of hard work since the war were tied up in the beef below Crazy Creek and everything would be lost because of this pig-headed bartender-parson.

Bill said coldly, "Do you fight, mister, as well as tend bar and deliver sermons?"

"I do," Preacher said.

Bill said, "That's fine."

He swung away, then, and strode across

Another sparklingly original, intensely dramatic, warmly romantic novelette by Art Lawson, who wrote this story, may be found in May RANGELAND ROMANCES. A fiction treat you can't afford to miss awaits you in "Miss Linda's Damned Yankee," a frontier love story you'll long remember! Now on sale!

the big room and out the door. Slick Teal skittered along in his wake, more like a dog than ever. On the boardwalk, Bill faced the little marshal.

"Okay," he said. "What's the play, friend? The smell's so strong I can't tell which skunk is making it."

Slick glanced up and down the road. Taking Bill's arm, he led him away from the swinging doors. He whispered hastily, "That herd of yours ain't worth a nickel below Crazy Creek—but on the cars it would fetch fifty thousand bucks."

"Ah!" Bill said. "So who gets paid?"

"For ten thousand of those berries," Slick said, "the grangers might, uh, not fight very hard if you happened to stampede your beef."

The hot fire flamed higher in Bill's eyes, and his fists clenched not far above the twin guns holstered at his thighs.

Slick Teal blinked rapidly and said, "I'm only making a guess, Bill. You go on home. Tonight or tomorrow somebody'll come down to the creek and talk it over with you. One of the Preacher's men."

More than anything else Bill wanted to pick up this little snake and push in his face. He had been taken in. He had really thought that the Jackass Alley boys and Preacher Tucker were not working together. Now he was sure that the first three were only fronting for the bartender who preached on Sundays.

Bill said slowly, "I don't think I'm going to pay anybody that ten thousand dollars."

Slick Teal's teeth showed in a ragged smirk. "Being an officer of the law," he said, "I can appreciate an honest man when I see one. It ain't legal to pay bribes, or to take them. Bill, I'd like to shake your hand."

"Officer," Bill said, "I can't oblige you."

Bill's spine itched and crawled as he walked down Depot Street away from Slick Teal, toward the station. . . .

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BILL HAWKINS was not surprised to find Red Cobb at the livery stable sitting on a box and chewing a straw. Red was railroad agent in Longhorn City and he owned the bank on Jackass Alley. Red had also been "elected" mayor in the "reform" administration. Below Red's feet was a little carpet bag, and Red looked mighty unhappy.

"How'd you make out?" Red asked.

"Guess," Bill said.

Red crooked a finger at him, motioning for Bill to come closer. Bill stepped over to the box, his eyes narrowed, alert for an ambush. Red Cobb asked in a whisper, "He offer a deal?"

"He didn't offer nothing," Bill said. "He didn't even preach a sermon. All he said was 'No'."

"No?" Red repeated, a worried frown creasing his forehead. "If that ain't the damndest. I thought that was his game." He shrugged. "Well, there ain't a thing I can do about it. Like smallpox. You know, Bill, I thought a little spondulix might encourage him to play ball. I brought a bundle of the green stuff along in case you needed it. I already sold that beef of yours. I got to deliver or pay indemnity. I'm going to fold up, too, if this goes on."

Bill said, "I sure am sorry for you, Red. My heart bleeds for you."

Red Cobb got off the box. "I better go home to bed," he said, "before I get a worse headache. See you in the poorhouse, Bill."

He picked up the carpet bag and walked to the hanging doors, his shoulders sagging, a pathetic figure in the flickering lantern light. Somehow it struck Bill as very funny. Stirring the stew, he thought to himself, that was what Red Cobb was up to, and pretending all the time that Bill did not know what they were doing. Bill laughed. He came to the conclusion that maybe he had better get a grip on the handle, too. He called to Red, "You ain't got ten thousand?"

Red Cobb wheeled. The worry creases grew shallower. "Sure," he said. He hurried back and whispered, "That's exactly what I brought."

"That's exactly what I need," Bill said. "Now, ain't that a coincidence?"

"For a fact?" Red seemed surprised.

"Yeah," Bill said. "I got an idea, Red. But you being mayor of Longhorn City I can't tell you about it. Being buyer of my cattle, though, I think ten thousand bucks would help me deliver."

"As buyer, it's yours, Bill," Red said. "But as mayor, you better not try anything illegal."

"I won't," Bill said.

Red Cobb went around to the lantern that hung from a shelf near the box where he had waited for Bill. He opened the carpet bag and showed Bill how it was full of cash. There was a paper in there, too, which he said Bill should sign. Bill read it, and it seemed reasonable enough. For the consideration of ten thousand dollars in cash Bill agreed to deliver a herd of steers to Red Cobb's stockyards, and when Bill Hawkins completed delivery, Red Cobb would pay him forty thousand dollars additional, more or less, depending on the count.

Bill counted the money, then signed. Red took a very deep breath.

"I feel better, Bill," he said. "I hope you don't need to use all of it."

Bill leaned closer to him. Red Cobb was number two on his list of the hombres he wanted to beat up. Some day, he promised himself, he would indulge his whim. When his herd was safe in the cars he would personally trim all these boys down to pint size, either individually or collectively. He told Red Cobb as much.

"I still don't savvy this stew you're brewing," he said, "but I know it's mostly skunk meat. I had a couple spoonsful of it and don't like it. Tell your pals that, Mayor."

He took Red by the shoulder to turn him around facing the doorway.

"My toe itches," he said. "Start running."

Red Cobb left in a sprint.

CHAPTER TWO

Beautiful Bushwhack Bait

BILL HAWKINS saddled his horse and told the big black, "Between here and Crazy Creek we're goin' to meet up with a bushwhacker, feller. When we do, you just keep on going. This bushwhacker will be the high sheriff."

The horse wagged its ears and Bill stepped aboard. The livery stable was on Texas Street. To reach the prairie he had to cross the railroad tracks and thread through the high-fenced stockyards where half a hundred bushwhackers could have been hidden. Beyond that Bill would be reasonably safe until he reached the trees along the creek. There he might run into trouble again.

Bill had to chance it. He rode past the depot, turned sharply left and lifted his horse to a trot. Behind him the loaded saddlebags felt like capped dynamite ready to explode. Ahead of him was the night sky blotched with dark clouds rolling up from the south.

Bill stayed close to the left-hand row of fences, sharply watching those to the right as he passed by. He knew that the attack would come from that side because the sheriff was right-handed and would not cuddle up to a fence with his gun-hand inside. He got by the first few with no incident and had nearly reached the open prairie when he spotted the first movement. Most of the yards were empty. But out here a bunch of wild horses had been corraled. It was beyond them that he saw the rider.

Bill dropped a hand to his gun-butt, rolled his big Mexican spurs and reined his horse in a tight arc that brought him around the corral to face the rider waiting there. He had pulled in the mount when he realized that this might be a trick to make him show his back to the left-hand row of fences. By that time it was too late, and sweat was standing on Bill's forehead.

"Evening," Bill said.

He had known immediately in the darkness that the rider was not Big Jim Kouse. But the answering voice surprised him. It was the same he had heard in that queerly quiet saloon an hour or so ago. It was the girl of the golden hair.

"Evening, yourself," she said. "You're acting skeery as a boogered steer."

"I got cause to," he said. A mighty nice-looking little trick she was, he thought, fine bushwhacker bait. "Be seeing you, miss."

He wheeled away immediately, hit the spurs again, and was free of the fences. No bullet sang past him. But there was no need to turn his head to know that the girl was following him. He had gone half a mile maybe before the feeling of foolishness came over him and made him slow down. Soon she was alongside, laughing

deep in her chest with a sound clear as a silver bell.

"You *are* skeery," she said.

Bill Hawkins was mad. The girl's dark Stetson had slipped back to be held only by the chin strap, leaving her hair free in the night. She was wearing that same wide-skirted dress she had on in the saloon, but riding astride it had slipped up to her knees and she seemed not the slightest bit self-conscious about it. Trying to keep his voice below an angry shout, Bill said, "Okay, miss, I am skeery. And what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing." She was sober in a flash. When she drew in her horse, Bill automatically stopped close to her. He wondered briefly if she was the emmisary that Slick Teal had said the Preacher would send out, yet it shocked him when she asked, "Did Red Cobb give you any money tonight?"

"Yeah," Bill said, "he did." Anger roiled through him again. It seemed that they were making this click off too closely —as if they had practiced it very carefully before he came. It was going one, two, three, like that. He could not cross Crazy Creek—no, indeed. Maybe he could if he paid the right people. So Red provided the money to pay. And here was the Preacher's daughter practically asking for it. It was entirely too neat. Bill laughed harshly. "You want it?" he asked.

"No." She shook her head so that the golden curls danced. "I want you to give it back to him. I thought that's what he was doing when I saw him running down to the depot with that little carpet bag."

"Why?" Bill asked.

"Because they'll kill you." The girl spoke almost fiercely. "They'll get your herd, your money, and you. Give it back to him, mister, and cancel your contract, and I'll see to it that your beef gets passage up from the creek."

The anger was deep in Bill. He did not like men who used women to forward their filthy little games, and he liked women even less who would let themselves be the tools of such men.

He said slowly, "No, they won't kill me, little girl. They won't take my herd unless they pay for it. And I'm bringing my beef up tomorrow. Just tell that to your psalm-singing daddy."

The girl's face whitened so that the change was obvious even in the night. She was biting her lower lip, and her blue eyes were wide. After a moment the smile came back to her lovely face.

"Big and tough," she said, "mean and nasty. But back there you were scared of shadows, mister. Okay, bring up your beef tomorrow. The homesteaders hereabouts are scared to death of Texas Fever. They'll be waiting for you—and they ain't shadows."

She raised her reins. "Let's go home, Gus," she said to her horse.

◇ ◇ ◇

BILL could not put that girl from his mind. The grangers let him pass their picket line, and he forded the creek near his herd. There was more than one campfire burning down here tonight. Though Bill had been the first one up the trail since the grangers laid down their deadline, another bunch had drifted in late that afternoon. Their boss was with the boys at the Double H cookfire and Bill recognized him. He was Peg-leg Smith, up from the Nueces. He had come farther than Bill.

"Hyah, Peg-leg!" Bill stepped down from the saddle.

Peg-leg was a little guy like a bantam rooster. A cannon ball had hit his right knee during the war but it had slowed him down hardly long enough to get fitted with a wooden substitute. He cussed briefly and fluently at Bill and shouted, "I just heard the news. What are you goin' to do about it, yuh ol' sinner?"

He and Bill shook hands. Bill said, "I'll tell you. Coosie—" he called to the cook —"there's a couple bottles in my saddlebags and a lot of money. Uncork the bottles and sit on the dinero for me, will you."

The cook ran with his tongue out like a dog. It had been a long time since his trail supply had run out and all the boys had talked so much today telling what they were going to do to the grangers, they were drier than old buffalo bones after a drought season.

"I'll tell you." Peg-leg Smith nearly dislocated an arm reaching for the first bottle the cook uncorked. He took a deep

drink of the liquor, smacked his lips and said, "Tomorrow, I'm going to run my beef right across that creek and keep 'em running until I hit the yards. That's what I'm going to do, Bill. How about offering me another drink?"

He still had the bottle and wasted no time tipping it up again. One of the Double H boys said, "We want to do the same thing, Bill."

"Have me offer you a drink?" Bill asked. "Or stampede our beef."

"Both," the cowboy said.

Bill bowed. "Granted." But the sense of humor was only a thin thread in him tonight and the anger deep and hot. "We'll be fighting women tomorrow as well as men," he told them. "One, anyway. And the chances are that gents who'll send their daughters out to battle will bring their babies along toting sling shots. This ain't a game we're used to playing, boys."

Peg-leg said, "You don't mean that about the women."

"Reckon I do," Bill said. He hunkered down by the fire. The two bottles had been around and there was still some left but Bill felt no need for whiskey tonight. Thought of that girl hit him harder and deeper than rotgut, and lifted him higher than the most expensive imported brandy.

"That Preacher's daughter who bartends in the Okay Saloon, is one of them," he brayed. "She tried to toll me into a trap tonight. Met me in the stockyards and said that Red Cobb and the boys were hunting my scalp. She said she'd arrange passage for my beef if I'd cancel my contract with Red. She wanted to get me back into town, boys, and into an ambush."

That was what Bill really thought, and the men nodded grimly, and Bill added, "But I ain't eating that kind of pie tonight. We'll wait until noon, tomorrow. The minute the bell rings, we move. Peg-leg, you can run your beef in behind ours. Now—" he hesitated ominously a moment —"I want a couple boys who'll volunteer to go into town tomorrow morning and open the stockyard gates so our beef don't run past the railroad and scatter."

Every man there including the cook offered to do the job. Bill was beginning to feel good again. This was action, movement. This was something he understood. It was not just another pot of stew cooked up by conspiring little men.

He laughed easily. "You, Coozie, you're out. You'd hang up in a saloon somewhere and we'd never see you again. Pedro, you can go—and Hank. Don't leave together." Bill's muscles eased up, and he relaxed beside the fire. He could not stop thinking about the Preacher's daughter. He said, "Coozie, don't need to look so long-faced. We'll all be in town tomorrow night. If I was you, I'd go up to the Okay for my drinking. Nice quiet place. Got signs all around like 'Moderation is a Virtue'. You ought to try it."

◇ ◇ ◇

BILL was up at dawn. He helped the boys divide the herd into four groups of five or six hundred each, and spotted them along the creek some three-fourths of a mile apart. Peg-leg Smith ran his beeves in behind cut into three similar herds. By doing this they

NO FINER DRINK
PURITY
PEPSI-COLA
with meals...or snacks

expected to spread the Grangers out so widely they would be able to get through. They would stampede one bunch across the river, and when the grangers bunched to stop it, they would run the rest around the opposition.

"Nothing to it," Bill told Peg-leg, very pleased with the plan. "This is the same kind of tactics Jeb Stewart used on the Yankees and, by God, we'll do them in, too."

"You seem to have forgot who won the war," Peg-leg reminded him.

Bill's answer was stopped by two sudden, quick shots from the chuck-wagon. That was the cook's signal for when Bill was wanted. Bill told Peg-leg so and said, "Come on," and loped the two miles to his rolling headquarters. The cook was talking to a rather disreputable-looking hombre who had ridden in on a decrepit crow-bait horse.

The moment Bill saw him he knew who he was. Not his name, but his mission. Planning the stampede, he had forgotten all about Slick Teal and the conversation on the boardwalk last night.

Bill asked sharply, "Preacher send you?"

"Nobody sent me." The man shook his head. "I don't know nobody named Preacher. I—uh—just been drifting through—and I—uh—got something confidential to tell you."

"You don't know nothing," Bill said, "that I don't already know jest twice as good."

"Okay!" The man shrugged sullenly and made a hesitant move to mount his horse.

There was something in his attitude, in that word "Okay" that touched Bill. This man had been sent by Preacher Tucker and had used the saloon's name as a hint to suggest to Bill why he had come. Bill stopped him. "Okay," he said. "Maybe I was wrong."

He stepped from the saddle, handed his reins to the cook and led the man to the back of the chuck-wagon, where they could be alone.

"I just didn't want no witnesses," the man told him, "but Preacher did send me out here. He's got a proposition. You put up ten thousand dollars bond that you don't spread Texas Fever and you can come through this afternoon at five o'clock."

Bill's lips twisted sardonically. "That's a very nice way of putting it. Ten thousand dollars bond."

"Sure," the man said. "You give me the ten thousand and you can come through."

Bill said, "How do I know you were sent by Preacher? And how do I know he'll do what you say."

"How do you know the grass will come up?" the man countered. "You don't. But by God, you sure can't feed cows without it."

Bill thought it through quickly. His boys were risking their lives pushing these cattle across the creek. Some of those grangers might be killed, too. And there was no doubt at all that a lot of cattle would be lost in the stampede he planned. Yet it hit his stiff pride hard paying a bribe; until the idea came to him. After all it was his money against their lives. It was too much to ask of them, and it still did not mean defeat for him. If only he could be sure who got that bribe money, he would go into Longhorn City personally and take it back. The further he got into the thought the more it appealed to his lobo instinct.

Yeah, that was it. Use your guns on the headman, not on the hirelings or the grangers who were probably only dupes of the Preacher.

"I'll do it," he said to the man. "There's one little item, though, that I want you to remember. If I'm double-crossed I'll kill your boss first and you second."

The man tried to smile. "Everything will be as smooth as beargrease," he said. "You got nothing to worry about. Not one thing."

Bill wondered. He told the man to wait, then he climbed into the chuck-wagon to fetch the money the cook had hidden there. He stuffed it into a feed sack which he gave to the man.

"Start 'em across at five this afternoon," the stranger said. "Bring 'em fast. The grangers will do some shooting, then run. They got to put on a show, savvy?"

"Yeah," Bill said. "I savvy."

He followed the man around the chuck-wagon and watched him climb aboard the crow-bait mount.

HAWKINS told Peg-leg what was up. He sent another of his cowboys to town to tell Hank and Pedro to keep their eyes open for this hombre who claimed to come from the Preacher. One was to hang around the stockyards. The other two were to watch Depot Street and Jackass Alley. All Bill wanted to know was where the man took the money. Once they determined that they were to case the place on all sides and report to Bill who went in and out. Then Peg-leg had an idea.

"I'll ride to town and talk to the Preacher," the little man said. "I'll tell him I'm stuck down here and I got to come through. That way I'll be on deck when the feller arrives in town and I'll have a good excuse for it, too. What do you say, Bill?"

"Fine," Bill said. "Tell him I sent you."

Peg-leg trotted over to his own camp to tell his boys that they were under Bill Hawkins' orders until they saw him again. Then he left directly for Longhorn City. Bill was alone. He rode to each of the bunches of steers to talk to the cowboys herding them. They would still follow his original plan, but they were not to use their guns on the grangers who had agreed to scatter after putting up a token battle. Everything was fixed, Bill told them.

Yet, through the hot morning and afternoon, he could not dispel the notion that something was awfully wrong. It was, strangely enough, memory of the girl that came back to haunt him. She was lovely, no doubt about it. But beyond that, in her blue eyes and clear voice, he had seen only honesty. Her old man, too, had that same straightforwardness to him, almost a simpleness in his face, and Bill had to tell himself over and over that appearances were deceiving.

Preacher Tucker had worked up a colossal fraud with the help of the grangers and the three shady gentlemen from Jackass Alley. In the name of quarantining Texas Fever they were going to levy a bond on each herd that approached town. Sooner or later that system would wipe out their trade with Texas. But Bill knew they weren't worried about that. They would lose the cattle business anyway as soon as the next terminus to the railroad was opened to the west.

In the meantime, make hay, brother.

So Bill rode hard to drive down his misgivings. He told the boys that he would give the signal when they were to move; three bunched shots at five o'clock. He skirted the creek a couple of times to check up on the granger's movements. Nothing new occurred over there. At noontime some men rode out from the nearer farms to relieve those who were already on duty. Some of the men's wives came down, then went away again. Once Bill thought he saw the golden hair of Sally Tucker as she rode along the picket line. That, he said to himself, was the angel-faced girl telling the farmers that a deal had been made with the Texans.

It made Bill so bitterly angry that when he passed his chuck-wagon the next time and found that Big Jim Kouse had come calling, he almost knocked the man down.

"Beat it, Sheriff," he snapped. "Get the hell out of here. This ain't your county."

The sheriff grinned. "That's just what I come down to tell you, Bill. I been thinking about your troubles. It's the law that keeps you out, but I got to thinking the law was too hard. Course I can't change it."

"Course not," Bill said sardonically.

The sheriff ignored his tone. "I heard a rumor of trouble up to the north end of the county," he told Bill. "I better be going now. It's a long way from here. Maybe I should stick around, but everything looks peaceful around the creek."

Bill could not miss the hint. The sheriff might just as well have said that he had received his cut in Bill's bribe and was consequently removing himself so that he would not see Bill break the law. It hit Bill square in the middle of his sorest spot and finally he could not control his temper any longer.

He kneed his horse up to the lawman. Then he grabbed Big Jim by the collar and rolled his spurs along his mount's ribs. Both horses jumped ahead in terror, Bill's dragging the other with it. Bill twisted on the throat of Big Jim's shirt until the fat man's face turned purple, and he kept jogging his spurs, kicking both mounts toward the creek while he held Big Jim helpless. When he reached the

bank, Bill said softly, "Thanks for the hint, Lawman. I'll take it."

And he yanked hard, pulling the sheriff from the saddle to tumble him into the water. He waited while Big Jim's mount plowed across the stream kicking spray ten feet above the banks. Then he reared his horse, drew his pistol and shot three times into the sky.

Seconds passed. From far down the line came the answers. Sixshooters barked. Slickers snapped. Cowboys loosed the terrible rebel yell. The sheriff plunged up the far bank of the creek, scrambling like a big pig. A moment later the sod began to rumble with the pound of four thousand hoofs—and the bellow of frightened, stampeded longhorns lifted its horrible thunder to the afternoon sky.

CHAPTER THREE

Steer Stampede

BILL watched them rush by. In the creek and out, they went, tearing up brush and dragging it with them. They lowered their heads, poked their noses to the north and ran. They ran blindly, instinctively, like four thousand locomotives on a rampage with no one at the throttle. You could not stop them. Nothing could halt them now until their orneriness was worked out of them and they had to quit from sheer exhaustion. That would be some ten miles away, Bill reckoned, in the stockyards of Longhorn City.

Bill laughed. The sheriff, fat as an old cow, was trying to beat the stampede. Far across the prairie he waddled, making remarkable time, not even bothering to glance back at the horror that pursued him. But, closer to the creek, not running at all, were the grangers. They were standing their ground, and Bill thought they were overdoing their mock battle. He saw a shot steer plow over onto its snout, dig its horns into the sod and roll over twice before coming to a soggy halt. A second steer ran out of the bunch with which he had been traveling. He stopped all alone in a clear space, dazed, and collapsed slowly like a leaking balloon.

Down-creek one of Bill's cowboys flew from the saddle while his horse tumbled dead under him. The puncher whirled over and over to strike the creek with a great splash. Bill was paralyzed until the cowboy's head reappeared above the surface and the man's ringing curses reached him. Then he knew something had gone wrong.

Bill knew with dread certainty that he had been double-crossed.

That was what he had been fearing today. That was what he had not been quite able to discover in all the welter of moves and counter-moves. It was the seasoning to the stew that he had not detected. He had been promised passage. Yet these homesteaders were fighting for their lives.

Bill took no time to think. He knew only that he had to stop this. He could not turn his herd, but he might be able to keep his boys from crossing the creek into almost certain slaughter. Coming up on him now was the solid phalanx of Peg-leg Smith's beef that had been held behind his. Peg-leg's punchers had not seen what Bill had seen at the creek. They were snapping their slickers, terrifying their cattle, according to plan.

Bill rode toward them shouting, shooting. He got the attention of one of his men and screamed over the turmoil.

"Back—don't cross the creek—they're shooting to kill."

The man understood slowly, more from Bill's actions than his words. He spurred his way to spread the warning while Bill turned to the west.

"Back!" Bill shouted.

Yet the cattle could not be stopped. The first wave had already passed over the grangers; Bill's steers were well on their way to Longhorn City and the farmers on the far side of the stream were sniping at Bill's cowboys. Bill shouted at them, too, but his voice was lost in the howling storm. Then Bill discovered that he was caught in the second great tidal wave of crazed beef. Peg-leg's herd was thundering down on him.

He had to make a run for it. Spray blinded him as he knifed through the shallow creek, and the cold water killed some of the fire in his brain. Up the far bank he held his hand above his head, signalling the grangers that he was not coming with flaming guns. They respected that, those

who were nearest, but a rider just emerging from the roiling dust fired point-blank at him and skinned his shoulder with a leaden slug.

Bill acted instinctively. Bill was awfully fast with a sixshooter, and his finger had settled on the trigger before he really knew what he was doing. At the same instant he saw that it was the girl who had shot him, the Preacher's daughter who had come to do battle as she had promised last night. Yet it was too late to stop that bullet and Bill had aimed too well. It took her horse through the brain, and the dying mount ran on—ran like a toy whose spring needs winding, until his fore legs gave way and he hit the prairie.

The girl went over the dead horse's head.

White legs flashed, golden hair, then she struck the sod and she was as inert as the dead cattle strewn over the prairie. She did not look real nor human lying there covered by the full-skirted dress she wore.

Bill could not wait. Peg-leg's cattle had crossed the creek and were coming on with no one to slow them. The grangers who had seen what Bill had done had turned their guns on him. He felt the lead whining past, heard the *thwack* and sing as a bullet snipped through his hat. Bill cursed. He almost cried. Couldn't they see—couldn't those damn fool farmers see that the Preacher's daughter would be trampled to shreds if they killed him?

He was upon her now. Wheeling his horse, leaning down, he was a perfect target for a moment. Miraculously, nothing struck him as he slipped an arm behind her shoulders and lifted. Reining back, the mount reared, helping him hoist her to his knees. Then Bill's spurs bit speed from the big black.

So close was the stampede Bill might have been its leader. Bill held the girl close, amazed at the smallness and softness of one with so much courage. Bill prayed, edging his horse always to the west. He spoke to the horse, and the gallant animal responded.

Never did they get more than ten feet ahead of the spike-horned wall of death. A prairie dog hole, anything that might break the horse's stride would bring an end compounded of sharp hoofs, of needle horns, and tons of crazy-wild Texas steers.

But finally, after what seemed to be years, they reached the edge. The horse stopped of its own volition, panting, sweating, trembling, while the cattle rushed past them to the pens of Longhorn City and the slaughter houses of Chicago. . . .

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BILL walked into the Okay Saloon with the girl in his arms. There were few men there, most of them having gone down to the stockyards to witness the great stampede whose thunder had telegraphed its approach. And those men who were on hand, drinking or talking, silently moved over when Bill came in. Those who toted pistols twined fingers around the butts. Those who had brought rifles or shotguns to town today sidled toward the rack where they had stacked them. There were not many men in the Okay Saloon; ten at the most; but each had a bullet marked with Bill Hawkins' obituary.

Bill laid the girl on the bar. He pulled her long dress down over her toes, and crumpled up his hat to serve as a pillow for her golden head. Hawk-faced Preacher Tucker stared at her, fascinated, and Bill asked bitterly, "Where's some of that free water, mister?"

The Preacher set a pitcher on the bar and Bill carefully washed dust and blood from the girl's face. There was a purpling bruise high on her forehead, a strange pallor to her cheeks. But when Bill put his head to her breast he could feel her heart beating strongly.

In the Okay, the men were waiting for Preacher to give his signal, then they would riddle Bill Hawkins with nearly a dozen guns and throw him out into Depot Street as a lesson to Texans who take Kansas law into their own hands. They would kill passionately, with hot blood, not cold and calculated as the little marshal they had elected.

But the Preacher was waiting. He was saying a prayer, silent, grim. He was reminding himself of all the holy things he had told his congregation on Sunday, of all the homey wisdom he passed over the

bar with drinks on weekdays. Somehow none of this meant much to him while his daughter lay on the bar with blood in her golden hair.

Then Bill jerked his head toward the back-bar mirror. His lips lifted sardonically at the corners.

"She'll come to, pretty soon," he said. "When she does, tell her to read that sign. Tell her pappy to read it, too. 'Moderation is a virtue'." Bill laughed. "Me—" he went on—"I'm going to be immoderate for a few minutes. But I'll be back. And when I arrive—have a six-shooter in your hand. Or a shotgun. Or a howitzer. You better be ready, mister, because I'm going to be immoderate as hell."

He swung away, turned his back on them. No one spoke. No one drew a gun. Lightning had struck, stopping them dead in their tracks.

And Bill was almost to the swinging doors when they batted open, revealing the ratty little marshal of Longhorn City. Slick Teal had come for Bill with a pistol in his hand and his finger curled on the trigger.

"Hoist, cowboy."

"Move over, skunk," Bill said.

Indrawn breath of a half-score men drifted like a winter wind through the big barroom. There was a slight flurry where the girl had been laid, where her father still watched her in wonder. Slick Teal's voice cracked again. It ran up the scale because Slick was really frightened for the first time in his life. His finger was ready to squeeze the trigger of his gun and the other man's pistols were still in their holsters. Yet Slick Teal had never before looked fate in the face and it terrified him.

"Hoist!" he squealed.

"You," Bill said, "are number one."

Slick's gun spat flame. Slick was so unnerved, he missed. His bullet hit the backbar mirror with a sharp thump followed by a whining crackle as glass splintered. Desperately he worked the mechanism. But Bill stepped into him. Bill got the barrel of the gun, yanked it from Slick's hand and knocked the marshal into oblivion with his own weapon.

Then he stepped over the little man and into the night, leaving the swinging doors to slat back and forth gently behind him.

He heard the girl's voice before he moved on down the boardwalk. It was dreamy, sleepy. Yet it still had some of that bell-like quality to it. Though he did not get what she said, the tone echoed within him. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Texan's Victory Trail

A COWBOY ran toward him. It was his Mexican hand, Pedro. Pedro was breathing hard and Bill said, "Too bad I got to kill her old man."

Pedro did not know that Bill was speaking his darkest thoughts. Pedro said hastily, tripping through the words, "These sheriff—he joost come. Peg-leg steel talks to Rojo, Red. These monay, she ees under the table of Red."

Bill Hawkins strode on down the boardwalk. Pedro hurried beside him. At the corner of Depot Street and Jackass Alley Bill stopped. The fires had burned down inside him so he could listen.

"What happened?" he asked.

"We watched," Pedro told him. "We see these hombre come to town with a sack. He goes eento the Lone Star. We watch some more. Red Cobb, he comes from hees bank and goes eento the Lone Star. Then Peg-leg follow. Peg-leg talks all day to these Red Cobb. Peg-leg eat weeth these Red Cobb. Dreenk weeth heem. Peg-leg does everytheeng weeth these Red Cobb. When they go out, I go een, and these monay she ees steel undair the table. The man who breeng eet does not dare move eet."

Bill could see a shred of humor in that. Peg-leg Smith carrying on a one-man filibuster all afternoon, the rest of the boys constantly haunting him. There was one thing wrong with it, however. That Red Cobb had the money proved nothing to Bill. Bill had expected that. He had wanted to know what Red Cobb did with it. Did he turn it over to Preacher—or to Big Jim Kouse? Or did he keep it for himself?

It was too late to find out now, though the consequences might be dire. He asked Pedro, "Who's in there."

"El Sheriff, Red Cobb, these othaire man, Peg-leg."

"Fine," Bill said. "Now, I want you, Pedro, and Hank to keep an eye on the Lone Star doors. You take the front. Hank takes the rear. *Sabe?*"

"*Si, Señor.*"

"Don't let anybody out—or anybody in—except the Preacher."

Pedro nodded. Bill turned into Jackass Alley. He became aware of the fact that every doorway held men. Every window on the Alley was darkened, hardly hiding the painted faces of women, the expectant faces of men who waited for judgment to strike. Bill passed Red Cobb's bank, walking stiff and straight, ignoring the men loafing there. He reached the Lone Star, and Pedro drifted away from him. Pedro touched his arm before leaving. It was the silent promise of a faithful vaquero to fight to the death for his boss. It gave Bill a queer, ticklish feeling in his throat.

Bill stepped over the threshold. There was nobody in this room that he wanted to see except the man who had come to his camp for the money. The bartender was there, and five honkatonk girls, so terrified their paint looked like enamel on their cheeks.

"Beat it, sisters," Bill said. "You, too, Barkeep. Get the hell out of here." Over his shoulder he shouted, "Let this bunch of sheep out, Pedro."

The girls skittered for the door. The bartender would not run, yet he was close behind them when they entered the night. Men in the shadows whistled as the girls appeared. The bartender swore. And the man who had fetched the sack of banknotes stared sullenly in the mirror. To Bill it looked as if he were counting the growing beads of sweat on his own forehead.

"What's your name?" Bill asked.

"Joe," the man said, and watched Bill's reflection in the mirror.

"That's a nice name," Bill said. "It comes from the Bible. You take that dinero to the Preacher?"

"Sure I did," he said. He swung around then, his face flushed. "Listen—I had to do it. They made me do it. You can't kill me for running errands."

"That being the case," Bill said slowly, "hang around a while. Wait here, Joe. You'll be shot if you go out the front door. Just wait until I can tell my men you're a good boy on the way to Sunday school."

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BILL strode past Joe toward the door leading to the backroom. He had reached the bar's end when the *suff* of indrawn breath warned him. It was plain in the silence of that empty room, as clear as the rattle of a snake striking in the desert. Close upon it was the ring of Bill's spurs as he wheeled on his toes; the quick tattoo beat of two shots so close together their echoes blended into one.

Joe clutched his shirt. His smoking gun fell from laxing fingers and he tried to cling to the bar. His face was horrible to look upon as he slipped down to the floor.

"Just a messenger boy," Bill said to himself. "That's what happens to messenger boys with itchy trigger fingers."

He dropped his Colt into its holster, then opened the door. To the three men sitting around the table in the backroom, Bill said, "I just killed the Preacher's messenger boy."

Red Cobb's worried expression showed signs of hopefulness. The sheriff, exhausted from running ten miles, mad and shamed clear down to his fancy boots by Bill Hawkins' treatment of him, could only growl like a caged grizzly. But little Peg-leg Smith grinned widely at his friend from Texas.

"You don't mean that Joe?" he asked. "Why—we just heard you telling Joe he was a good boy."

"I made a mistake," Bill said. "Joe tried to kill me." He began to laugh at Red Cobb and Big Jim Kouse. "Funny thing—nobody who ever tried to kill me ever especially succeeded. Joke on them, ain't it? You know—" he went on slowly—"that psalm-singing bartender, The Preacher, tried to double-cross me today. I paid him a bond to let my beef cross the river. Then his boys tried to shoot me up."

Red Cobb and Big Jim avoided each other's eyes. Bill went on, "You two be-

ing local Mayor of this town, and Sheriff of this county, ought to know about things like that. Here's the Preacher taking bribes. I expect you to arrest him, Jim, because little Slick Teal is too sick to do so."

The men blinked sharply. They had not expected this approach. Peg-leg looked puzzled, too. Then Bill dropped his thunderbolt. "Or is that graft still under the table?"

Red Cobb and Big Jim Kouse gave themselves away. Their eyes flickered, and Red said, "I'm your friend, Bill. I thought the Preacher would do something like that. I got a hold of the money. I got it right here for you. I was waiting for us three to get together. Then we'd pinch the Preacher."

Red pushed back his chair. He was reaching for the sack on which Peg-leg was resting his one good foot. Bill knew he would come up with a sixshooter as well.

Big Jim talked fast! "Sure, that's right. We was going to pinch Joe, that crooked rat Joe, too."

"Then everything's settled," Bill Hawkins said. "Let's go get him now—Preacher, I mean—before he runs away." Bill grinned amiably. "Want to come along, Peg-leg?"

"Sure," Peg-leg said. And he was still grinning.

It was odd, Bill thought, what comes to a man's mind at times like this. He saw Sally Tucker's face again; not Sally behind the bar of her father's odd saloon; not Sally after he had brought her home. He saw her as he had when he scooped her from the prairie before the hoofs of the stampede—dust and blood—with her eyes closed—her lips moving faintly as if she was trying desperately to tell him something.

He saw Sally before him, and he was listening to her unspoken words.

He also saw Red Cobb lifting the sack from the floor, knocking it against Big Jim Kouse's knees. When that sack reached the table level, Red Cobb would try to kill him. Big Jim would take Peg-leg Smith.

Bill hurried them; he gave them the opportunity they wanted. Standing in the doorway he glanced across the empty barroom. Joe had stopped kicking. Outside was the heavy hush of expectancy. From the stockyards came the steady low of corraled cattle.

Bill took one step with his back to those men in that room. Peg-leg had not moved. Red Cobb had the sack on his lap and his cocked gun behind it. Red Cobb's eyes were staring at the spot where Bill's suspenders crossed when Bill moved from the doorway. And Red had never seen anybody whirl around so fast.

It was like the pirouette of a ballet dancer. Red tripped his trigger. Bill dropped. His eyes were below the level of the table when his gun came up. He did not bother with Big Jim Kouse. Peg-leg could take care of that hombre. Bill concentrated on the man who was shooting at him.

Red's first bullet gnawed through the door-jamb. His second ricochetted off the table top to whine across the barroom with an angry sound. Then Bill's gunfire got to him. He fired right through that sack three times. And the one slug that bored its way past the bundles of banknotes, ended the mayor's career. Red Cobb fell face down on the table, his life-blood drenching the money he had died to steal.

Big Jim Kouse froze on his gun. Peg-leg Smith had to slap him hard on the face to make him come out of his trance. Bill said softly, "Talk fast, Jim, and we'll let you go."

Big Jim talked. Later on he repeated his story to Preacher Tucker. Then he resigned his job as sheriff and rode away. Big Jim would never be seen again in these parts. . . .

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BILL HAWKINS would not take the job Longhorn City offered him. He had something more important to do. He talked it over with Preacher Tucker in the upstairs living room over Preacher's bar. Peg-leg joined in the parly, and Sally listened, her blue eyes grave.

"You played right into their hands," Bill told Preacher. "It's funny, I thought you were working with them. They were using your ban on Texas beef to fatten their own bellies. They encouraged me to

stampede so that you and I would fight. They were trying to get us to do their dirty work—and none of us would have bitten except for your law against Texas beef."

"That law," Preacher said sternly, "still holds, Mister Hawkins. Texas Fever is already decimating our local beef. The only way of stamping it out is to keep Texas cattle out of the country. That's the only way."

"No," Bill said, "that ain't the only way. Another herd will be at the creek tomorrow. They'll stampede, too. You can't keep 'em from coming." He let them think that over. "But I can keep the fever out. Peg-leg and I can do it. Give us material to build some dipping tanks. Give us some creosote. The boys will kick like hell at being held up but they'll do what Peg-leg and I tell 'em to. They'll dip their beef, bring it up a road instead of a trail two miles wide. They won't bring a single tick or sick cow into Longhorn City."

Preacher Tucker's eyes saw the light. He saw more than that. He saw the cattlemen and farmers working together, burying their feuds for common good. The Preacher saw the West that he had fought so long to build. It was just around the corner.

He shook hands with Bill. "I'll send down some boys tomorrow," he said, "to help you build a fence and some dipping chutes."

"Thanks," Bill said.

When he got up to go his eyes turned inevitably toward Sally Tucker. The blue was still in the bruise on her forehead. But, God, she was lovely. The smile came swiftly to his lips.

"Mind if I come down and watch sometime?" she asked.

Bill said, "It ain't very interesting."

"I'll be down," she said. "Thanks for the invitation."

Bill and Peg-leg left. Peg-leg said, "Kinda plain, ain't she. Be a bother having her around."

Peg-leg was grinning. But Bill said, "Shut up."

THE END

★ ★ ★

"THE LAW OF THE BADLANDS"

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TALK FAST—OR DIE!

By L. ERNENWEIN

PETE ROBILLARDE reached the north rim of Estacado Divide at twilight. Here he halted to allow his bug-branded bronc to take a breather. Ahead, so near that the metallic ring of a blacksmith's hammer on the anvil drifted plainly up to him, was Bonanza Bend. Behind him were the Mexican Hills—and two years of hell.

Sitting with his tall body tilted forward in the saddle, Robillarde considered Bonanza Bend with a patient thoroughness. Gray-eyed, sun-blackened and shaggy of hair, he looked like a wary wolf—like a lean and hungry wolf scenting town smell for the first time in months. And so he was. The Lincoln County War had burned the lobo brand on him; it had

Quickly, then, Robillarde flung his last white chip into the game. "Grab your gun!" he growled.

Pistol Pete's Colt prowess failed him in the boomtown of Bonanza Bend when, to save two lives—he had to talk his deadly gunswift gambler foe into showing the white feather!

turned him into a posse-dodging renegade who rode with a grim and simple philosophy.

Pete Robillarde was thinking about that now as he gazed down at the sprawling boomtown below him. He was remembering the pulque-crazed charro who'd tried to knife him in the back at Los Tracos, three days ago. A backbar mirror had warned Pete in time to fend off that knife and shoot down his attacker. But the knife had drawn blood . . . and the dead man had many friends among the rurales. So now Pete Robillarde was a wanted man on *both* sides of the Border.

"I'm getting as popular as Billy the Kid," he muttered with a self-mocking grin. "Everybody wants me."

He recalled what the buck-toothed young Lincoln County killer had told him once when they were riding for Alex McSween. "The difference between living and dying is a damn simple thing," Billy had declared. "Simple as the speed of a man's right hand."

That, Robillarde reflected, was the gunsmoke philosophy of all wanted men. No matter how peaceable they were when they started out, they inevitably reached Bill Bonney's conclusion. It was the only creed they could cling to; it shaped the way of their living and foreshadowed the manner of their dying. And because he was a firm believer in this creed, it had brought Pete Robillarde to this violent little town called Bonanza Bend.

"I've got to find out," he drawled, and dug a dog-eared newspaper clipping from his shirt pocket, using his left hand to accomplish this chore.

The brief article was headed LINCOLN COUNTY AFFAIRS. It said:

"Dr. John Dawson, accompanied by his lovely daughter, Laurie, left on the morning stage for Bonanza Bend, where he will open an office in the Grand Central Hotel. Lincoln's loss is Bonanza Bend's gain; the new mining camp couldn't find a more competent medico. Doc's many friends are sorry to see him go."

Robillarde slipped the clipping back into his pocket and sat for a moment longer regarding the dusk-hazed town below him. Then he said again, "I've got to find out."

IT WAS full dark when Robillarde came to the rubbish-littered outskirts of Bonanza Bend. He rode around a creaking ore wagon whose driver profanely urged a six-horse hitch up-grade toward the smelter; he turned into a narrow alley and passed peeling old 'dobes that were here long before gold's clarion call had beckoned greedy hordes to the Gravestone Hills. These candle-lit hovels reminded him of his back-trail; they had the pungent smell of frijoles and tortillas, of pulque and woodsmoke and stables, all blending into one musky odor that was like no other.

A girl in a dimly-lighted doorway called: *"Como esta, querido?"*

And because Robillarde had heard the low-voiced invitations of many warm-eyed Pepitas below the Border he understood at once that he was riding through this town's *congal* district. Ignoring the girl, he went on to the alleyhead and turned into Bonanza Bend's wide main thoroughfare.

Men of all colors and all creeds crowded the boardwalks and piano music merged with the maudlin laughter of painted ladies. The yellow bloom of many lamps made bright beacons across the dust; it lighted the false-fronted frame buildings and the faces of men who stood in front of them.

All this roundabout lamplight put a wary vigilance into Pete Robillarde. He watched a bunch of riders slide their horses to a dust-churning stop in front of the Blue Bull Saloon and for a fleeting moment his probing eyes searched for sight of a lawbadge in that yonderly group. Then he grinned and relaxed. Hell, every bunch of riders didn't mean a posse. He'd have to get over that spooky notion . . . .

Three miners staggered across the street singing *Black-Eyed Susie* with drunken abandon. A gun exploded somewhere in a back alley and the thought came to Robillarde that this wide-open boomtown might be the proper place for a noose-dodging drifter to lick his wounds. If there was any law here it didn't show on the surface, and though there were people in Bonanza Bend who knew him they might not recognize him now. The smoky years had honed him to a lathy

gauntness; they'd aged him and changed him, inside and out.

He passed the Bird Cage Casino, the Melodian Dance Hall and the Acme Mercantile. A high-wheeled freighter, swinging wide into the mercantile's wagonyard, forced him close to the sidewalk in front of the Grand Central Hotel. And in that moment he saw Laurie Dawson standing in the hotel doorway—heard her call urgently, "Dad, Marshal Morgan is worse. I'm afraid he's dying!"

Whereupon a goateed old man said, "Pardon me, gentleman," and turned quickly away from the group of men on the veranda.

Almost at once, then, Laurie Dawson was gone. But the picture she'd made standing there with lobby lamplight burnishing her honey-hued hair stayed with Pete Robillarde as he rode on along the street. A high sense of anticipation ran through him. It would be good to talk with Laurie again; even though his outlaw brand had blotted out their old romance, it would be good to talk with her again . . .

And because he had no inkling of the gimmick game Fate had fashioned for him in Bonanza Bend, Robillarde forgot temporarily the grim, gunsmoke philosophy of Billy the Kid. But later he would remember it and the killer's creed would run like a chant through his mind . . . *simple as the speed of a man's right hand*, . . .

Robillarde put up his leg-weary bronc at Bill Braddock's livery and walked leisurely along the street, smiling a little because the old liveryman had failed to recognize him. But when he washed the dust of travel from his throat with a drink at the Blue Bull bar he saw the squinty-eyed way Sponge Shannon stare at him. And he stopped smiling.

For a dozen seconds, while Robillarde finished his drink, Shannon stood methodically mopping the bar with the sponge which had given him his name. Then he blurted abruptly, "Pete Robillarde! Pistol Pete Robillarde!"

That did it. A red-shirted miner drew away from Robillarde as if retreating from a smouldering fuse, and two dust-peppered cowpunchers on the other side turned to eye him speculatively.

Robillarde said, "Hello, Sponge."

A quick grin rutted the bartender's triple-chinned face. He said slyly, "So you decided to give our town a whirl, eh, Pete? Well, you couldn't of come at a better time. Cameo Kimberlake is gittin' hisself elected mayor tomorrow. He made it a brass-riveted cinch by shootin' it out with Marshal Morgan this afternoon. Beginnin' right now, Bonanza Bend is runnin' high, wide and handsome!"

Mention of the marshal made Robillarde remember Laurie's urgent words in the hotel doorway. She'd said the badge-toter was dying.

The significance of that, and the information that Cameo Kimberlake was slated to become mayor, brought a thin smile to Robillarde's lips. Sounds like a real nice setup," he reflected. "It does for a fact."

Whereupon he sauntered out to the street and, seeing the way this town was celebrating the downfall of law and order, he smiled again. Cameo Kimberlake was the smartest gambler west of the Pecos and he was a number one gunslick to boot. With him in the mayor's chair Bonanza Bend would become a renegade's roost within twenty-four hours . . . .

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IT OCCURRED to him, then, that this wouldn't be a proper place for Laurie Dawson to live. These boomtowns were bad enough at their best; without some semblance of law enforcement they became Gomorrah hell-holes of festering corruption. Yet, even with that opening wedge of premonition nagging at the fringes of his mind, Pete Robillarde felt no real uneasiness. Rather, he had a feeling of relaxation in the knowledge that Bonanza Bend had no badge-toter. It gave him a safer feeling.

He turned into the Oriental Cafe and ate a hearty supper. In comparison to the saddle-pocket scraps and meager Mexican meals which had sustained him so long, this supper was a banquet. The food, in addition to the good whiskey he'd had at the Blue Bull, gave him a mellow sense of well being. It was good to be back on the American side of the line. And he'd soon be with Laurie, seeing the sweet way her lips curved when she smiled, hearing the

gentle melody of her voice, smelling the fine fragrance of her honey-hued hair.

These were the things he was remembering as he went up the hotel steps. The things he hadn't forgotten during two long years of law-dodging. And though they had nothing to do with his being here, they made this mission less desperate. No matter what Doc Dawson's final decision might be, seeing Laurie again would make this brief interval a thing to remember on lonely back-trails below the Border.

When he wrote his name on the hotel register the clerk glanced at it, then hurriedly handed him a key. "Number five, Mister Robillarde," the clerk said respectfully. "I—I hope it'll be satisfactory, sir."

Robillarde grinned and went upstairs. A few shooting scrapes made a man's name mean something in this country. And the tales of those shootings lost nothing in the telling. One killing got to be three or four by the time it was told around; a few lucky draws became magic moves of incredible swiftness, and the man who made them was called a merciless machine of death and destruction.

Remembering by how narrow a margin he had survived down there in Los Tracos, Robillarde's lips straightened into a sober line. That knife hadn't killed him, but there was a good chance it had signed his death warrant just the same. He was savoring the bitter futility of that thought when he reached the top of the stairs and came face to face with Laurie Dawson in the hallway.

For one brief moment he thought she wasn't going to recognize him. She started to step around him and there was no change in the grave set of her lips. Then she halted, her eyes studying his face, and abruptly her slender hands came up to grasp his arms.

"Pete," she exclaimed, "you've come back!"

Almost at once, then, he was kissing her smile-curved lips; was feeling the firm pressure of her supple body against him. And because he understood how transient a thing this reunion was to be, Pete Robillarde embraced her with all the pent up eagerness of a man long lonely.

Until finally she pushed him away and her fingers rearranged a vagrant cluster of tumbled hair. "I've been hoping you'd come back for months," she declared almost tearfully, "ever since General Wallace signed the amnesty for everyone connected with the Lincoln County War."

That news startled Robillarde completely. "You mean—you mean I'm not wanted?" he demanded.

"Not by the law," she said smilingly, a glowing warmth in her upturned eyes. "But *I* want you, Pete—and I just finished praying that you'd arrive in time."

Which was another thing Robillarde couldn't quite comprehend. "In time for what?" he asked.

Laurie took his arm, turned him toward the stairway. "I'll tell you about it down on the veranda," she said soberly, and something in the way she said it stirred a quick premonition of trouble in him.

Moments later, when they sat in the shadows at the far end of the veranda and Laurie told him why she had prayed for his return, Pete Robillarde began to understand the full portent of that premonition.

"Dad is running for mayor against Cameo Kimberlake," she said gravely. "Not because he wants public office, but because he owes it to the decent people who've nominated him. He had a good chance of winning, until his friend Marshal Morgan got shot this afternoon. Now there'll be no one to keep Kimberlake's riff-raff from stuffing the ballot boxes tomorrow."

Robillarde frowned. Even though Doc Dawson had never taken kindly to his courtship of Laurie, he liked the old medico and respected him. And because he had a thorough knowledge of how these things went, Robillarde knew Dawson didn't have a Chinaman's chance to buck Cameo Kimberlake. The gambler would win the election; hell, he'd already won it by shooting Marshal Morgan!

"I'm sorry," Robillarde muttered. He reached over with his left hand and gripped her fingers. "But there's worse things than losing an election."

"Yes," she agreed. "That's why I prayed that you'd come tonight, Pete. If Marshal Morgan dies. Dad will go gunning for Kimberlake himself. And Morgan is dying right now!"

Those words sent a quick coldness through Robillarde's veins. They killed the warm glow of his gladness and put a cynical smile on his lips. Here was another twist in his renegade trail—the most ironical of many queer twists. After two years of living like a lobo wolf he was finally free of hounding law dogs. Now this girl whom he had lost, and miraculously regained, was wanting a favor. She was wanting him to shoot it out with Cameo Kimberlake before her father could keep a promise that meant certain death for the old medico!

He said finally, "Can't you talk your dad out of it, Laurie? Can't you make him see that he wouldn't stand a chance against Kimberlake in a gun fight? That it would be sure suicide?"

"I've tried to, Pete. But you know how stubborn Dad is. And he feels responsible for Marshal Morgan's shooting—says Morgan's loyalty to him caused Kimberlake to shoot the marshal. I've never seen Dad so broken up. He knows in his heart he can't save Morgan, but he won't give up."

"You want me to go shoot it out with Kimberlake now?" Robillarde asked quietly.

Her fingers tightened around his fingers and for a long moment she didn't answer. Then she said, very slowly, "No, Pete, I don't want you to shoot him, unless there's no other way. I'd like for you to scare him out of town—to tell him you'll kill him unless he leaves at once. That might be enough, Pete. He knows how fast you are with a gun. Everyone knows that."

"Yes," Robillarde reflected dryly. "Everyone knows that."

But there was one thing no one knew except himself. And that secret knowledge was like a sharp barb in his brain. He said, "All right, Laurie. But first I'd like to talk to your father."

"He won't listen to you, Pete. He's like a crazy man. He won't listen to anyone. When Marshal Morgan dies he'll go gunning for Kimberlake—and he'll be killed."

Robillarde said soberly, "I don't want to tell him anything. I want to ask him something."

He got up and was escorting Laurie toward the doorway when Doctor Dawson strode out of the lobby.

Laurie called, "Dad!"

Dawson's goated face swung around, showing drawn and bleak in the doorway light. He peered at Robillarde and, recognizing him, said, "So you finally heard about the amnesty decree. I was afraid you would."

Robillarde grinned. "Laurie just told me," he said. Then added thoughtfully: "I'd like to talk to you, Doc. Alone."

"Not now," the old medico snapped and turned down the steps. "No time for talk right now."

Laurie asked nervously, "Where you going, Dad?"

"Over to the marshal's office," Dawson replied, and hurried on down the walk.

Laurie grasped Robillarde's arm, said, "Pete, I'm scared. If Morgan is dead . . ."

Then she went quickly into the lobby and spoke to the clerk. When she turned back to the doorway her startled eyes were strangely dark against the ivory pallor of her face.

"The marshal died," she said slowly. "Dad has gone to get Morgan's gun!"

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FOR a hushed instant Pete Robillarde stood gripped by indecision. Why should he risk his hide for a cranky old medico who disliked him—who wouldn't grant him the courtesy of listening to him? But almost immediately Robillarde knew why—because this blond-haired girl meant more to him than anything else in the world. More than his newly acquired freedom—more than life itself. The irony of that brought a tight, twisted smile to his lips. *More than life itself. . . .*

She was tugging at his sleeve now, asking almost hysterically, "Oh, Pete, can't you do something quick? Before it's too late!"

Whereupon Robillarde said quietly, "Yes, Laurie. I'll call on Kimberlake, right now."

She reached up and kissed him then, and because Pete Robillarde was remembering the killer's creed, he gazed into her face for a full moment, like a man looking at something precious that he might never

see again. Then he turned abruptly down the steps and heard Laurie call: "God be with you, dear," as he walked toward the Bird Cage Casino.

It wasn't a long walk. Little more than the width of the dusty street. Crossing at an angle, Robillarde reached the opposite sidewalk, made his way through a group of loungers on the saloon stoop and stood for a moment in the doorway, allowing his eyes to accommodate themselves to the inside glare of high-hung chandeliers.

The long, barn-like room was entirely familiar. It was like countless others he'd seen. Bigger than some, but holding the same acrid stench of stale whiskey and tobacco smoke and perspiring bodies. The full length of the long bar was lined with men, all drinking and talking. A pimply-faced professor pounded out tunes on a piano beyond the bar, and across from him three poker tables were compactly circled with players. Near the front wall was a roulette wheel and here, talking to the idling stick-man, stood Cameo Kimberlake. . . .

He was a big man, this Cameo. A decade of soft living had made him flabby jowled and pot-bellied. But it hadn't changed his jade green eyes that were brittle as broken glass. Those eyes were watching Pete Robillarde now as he came through the batwings; they were considering him with the quick wariness of a wolf sighting another wolf.

For a tight interval, while Robillarde walked toward the roulette wheel, neither of them spoke. Then Kimberlake's cherry-lipped mouth eased into a grin and he said, "Hello, Robillarde."

That greeting wasn't loud. Yet it attracted instant attention. The professor ceased fingering the piano keys, and a man at the bar blurted, "There's Pistol Pete!"

When he was within ten feet of the big gambler, Robillarde halted, said, "I hear you're running for mayor, Cameo."

Kimberlake's eyes tightened instantly. But his voice was bland, almost cordial when he said, "Yeah, Robillarde. And I'll be elected tomorrow."

"You might be," Robillarde drawled, deliberately moving his right hand closer to the butt of his low-slung gun, "except that you won't be here tomorrow."

The impact of those words registered instantly. Kimberlake's flinty eyes bugged wide with astonishment. He stared at Robillarde as if disbelieving the words he had heard.

"What in hell do you mean?" he demanded.

"Just what I said. You won't be here tomorrow."

The big gambler continued to stare. He asked scoffingly, "Just where do you think I'll be?"

"That depends on you, Cameo. You might be in Tucson—or you might be planted up on Cemetery Hill."

Taut and fine-drawn despite his outward ease, Robillarde narrowly watched the reaction to his words, calculating their impact, judging their penetration. Cameo Kimberlake was no Gentle Annie, no spooky galoot to be easily stampeded. Cameo had a heavy sixgun strapped to his belt—and he knew how to use it!

"What in hell you butting in here for?" Kimberlake said angrily. "What's this election to you?"

Which was a question Pete Robillarde couldn't answer. The real reason for this word-slinging play wouldn't sound sensible; it was too fantastic for belief. There was only one chance in a hundred that he could get away with it. Remembering the grim philosophy of Billy the Kid, he smiled mirthlessly. The buck-toothed badman of Lincoln would never have made a play like this.

"What's the election to you?" Kimberlake asked again.

And that repetition gave Robillarde his answer. "I like the looks of this town," he declared. "I'm running for mayor myself—on a sixgun ticket."

An explosion could have caused no greater shock in this long room. Excited conversation ran along the bar like the buzzing of bees; men stared at Pete Robillarde, then turned their judging eyes on Kimberlake, as if looking at a man already dead.

And because he was gambling on the import of a renegade's reputation, Robillarde backed that declaration with another. "I'm giving you just five minutes to grab a horse at the livery and ride out of town, Kimberlake!"

The big gambler glanced at Robillarde's right hand. He cleared his throat, asked

bluntly, "And supposing I don't want to leave!"

Quickly, then Robillarde flung his last white chip into the game. "Grab your gun!" he growled.

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FOR a dozen heart-beats Cameo Kimberlake didn't move and he didn't speak. He just stood there with his flinty eyes probing Pete Robillarde's face. Suspense built up until it had a smell to it—the smell of death. And because the pressure of it was like a crushing vise against Robillarde's wire-taut nerves he snarled, "If you think you've got a chance, grab your gun!"

All the color seemed to freeze out of Kimberlake's face; it blanched to the bloodless shade of the huge cameo which decorated his black tie. For one long moment, while sweat greased his chalky cheeks, he stood gripped by the grappling hands of his own indecision. Then the fingers of his right hand splayed spasmodically and Pete Robillarde knew instantly that this man's pride was stronger than his fear—that the grisly reputation of a gunslick renegade wasn't enough. . . .

Yet even then, with the gambler's eyes tightening to squinting slits and his whole body poised for a flicking draw, Robillarde didn't change his play. He said, very confidently, "Come on—come on, Kimberlake. You know damn well you're not fast enough, so let's get it finished!"

For one vibrating instant he thought he had lost. But in the next moment he knew he had won. Kimberlake's eyes shifted to the gun in Robillarde's greased, halfbreed holster; his lips went loose.

Robillarde nodded toward the batwings, snapped, "You've got two minutes left."

The big gambler shambled from the saloon without speaking. Robillarde followed him to the stoop, stood there watching the hurried, beaten way Kimberlake walked to Braddock's Livery. And because he had been really afraid for the first time in his life, Robillarde's lips loosed a gusty sigh of relief.

Then, as Laurie called "Pete!" in a high, glad voice, he strode across the street. He was standing on the hotel veranda with her when Kimberlake rode out of town just as Doc Dawson walked up with a gun in his hand.

"If you had to mix into this thing why didn't you shoot him?" Dawson said.

Whereupon Pete Robillarde grinned and rolled up his right sleeve, exposing a bandage just above the wrist. "I couldn't lift my gun," he explained. "That's what I wanted to see you about. My right hand has been numb ever since a Mexican knifed me three days ago. Thought maybe you could splice the tendons, perhaps."

Laurie gave a startled cry. "You mean—you couldn't have drawn a gun?" she demanded. "You were just bluffing?"

Robillarde nodded.

"But Kimberlake might have called your bluff!" Doc Dawson exclaimed.

"He might've," Robillarde admitted, "but I was gambling on the killer's creed."

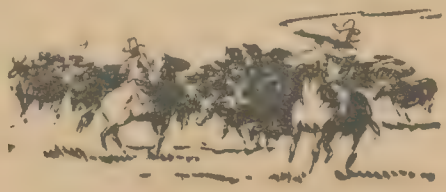
"What's that?" the medico demanded.

"It says the difference between living and dying depends on the speed of a man's right hand," Robillarde explained, and seeing the warm glow in Laurie's eyes, he added, "I used to believe in that creed, but now I've got a new one."

Whereupon he escorted Laurie to the far end of the veranda in the gentle fashion of a man with the woman he loves.

Doc Dawson called, "Better let me do a job on that arm, Pete."

But it was quite a long time before Robillarde and Laurie left the shadows there at the end of the hotel veranda—to let the doctor examine an injured arm which had lost, for all time, its vital, life-and-death importance.



A feud, an itch to kill, and a crisp thousand dollar bill sent Duke Kelsey after the last surviving Pardo fighter, on a trail that led through Hell—to a strange and glorious showdown!

Curt straightened in the saddle and let the pony go over the dusty, hot street.

RANGE FOR THE DAMNED

By JOHN G. PEARSOL

THE Pardo-Kelsey feud had been long and one-sided. The Kelseys were powerful, the Pardos weak. The unbridled hate that grew and festered between the factions was probably unequaled in the history of the West. Old Mart Kelsey put his finger on the cause of the feud when he'd said, "Of all the rotten, stinking things that wriggles and crawls, the Pardos is the worst. And of all the upstanding men that walk the earth, the Kelseys is the finest. So

why in hell shouldn't we tromp 'em?"

They did tromp them. The feud lasted till only one Pardo was left, while innumerable Kelseys populated Antelope Basin. Old Mart Kelsey was sheriff of Kelsey County. His brother, Lew, was the town banker. His son owned the General Store. Other kin dotted the range and owned most of the cattle in the county. Folks said that the only reason Curt Pardo had stayed alive was because pretty Lillie Kelsey, old Mart's daughter, had run away with him and married him.

It was proven that they were right when Old Mart explained Curt Pardo's being alive by saying, "He's done put himself behind a pair of apron strings. We can't kill the husband of our kin. But we can sit still and wait and watch him starve to death, 'cause no Pardo alive can make a living for himself, let alone for a woman."

Then, all of a sudden, hell broke loose. Young Curt, who had never taken part in the feud, came riding into town on his rangy, broom-tailed cow pony, his giant, shaggy-haired wolf dog, Queen, at his heels. Curt stopped at the bank and let the reins fall. Queen took them in her teeth and stared critically up and down the street, as though daring a low-down Kelsey to speak out of turn.

In the bank, young Curt stared frostily at old Lew Kelsey. "I lost more cattle last night," he said. "They cleaned me out at last. I trailed the rustlers back to your range—some of them. Pay me for my cattle, Kelsey! I see now why Mart made his brags that no Pardo could make a living. You damn well see to it that he don't!"

Lew Kelsey's face reddened and his eyes blazed. "Why you damn upstart!" he roared; his big, hairy hand reached for a gun on the counter. "I'll blow your liver half way up the street!"

Curt slipped a pistol barrel over the edge of the counter. "I never killed a Kelsey," he said softly, "but it ain't too late to start. Pay me, Lew! Eight thousand! Pay me now!"

Cursing under his breath, Lew Kelsey counted out eight thousand dollars. Curt stuffed the bills inside his shirt. He backed toward the street.

"Some of your kin was fightin' stock," old Lew raged as Curt neared the door, "But you was always chicken-livered. You proved that when you married Mart's daughter. But now you're game for any Kelsey gun, Pardo. It's open season again!"

"Fine!" Curt snapped. "I didn't do any feudin' because I didn't think all the Kelseys was skunks. Now I know better. Come a-shootin' any time!"

He stepped backward and out of the door. A bullet from old Lew's gun snarled after him, the sound of the shot racketing up the street. Queen, the wolf-dog, loosed the reins from her teeth as Curt grabbed for them.

Up at the sheriff's office, old Mart Kelsey whirled, slid a gun from his holster and took a quick shot at Curt as Lew came raging out of the bank door yelling,

"Robbers! A damn Pardo! Mart! Come a-runnin'!"

Mart's shot missed when Curt bent low over his horse's neck. The wolf dog bounded along beside the pony, a wicked shine in her eyes as the bullets began to fly. Curt straightened in the saddle and let the pony go over the dusty, hot street.

Young Ben Kelsey came helling out of the blacksmith shop, a pistol in his paw. Pete, his brother, who ran the General Store, stepped out onto the porch. Old Mart came thundering down the street on a big black horse that the Kelsey clan boasted could outrun the devil, even if the devil had wings.

"Young Pardo has cut himself out a nice plot in Boothill," a by-stander predicted as he watched the Kelseys thunder out of Salinas after Curt. "But it was all cut and dried, anyway. It had to come, sooner or later. Young Lillie Pardo is a widow right now. It's a shame."

But Curt Pardo fooled a lot of people. Most of all he fooled the Kelseys. His pony didn't look like much, but it made a hobbyhorse out of old Mart's celebrated stallion. The long-legged, wiry broom-tail outran the best horses in the county, sent them back home with their tails between their legs.

"But we'll git him!" Old Mart boasted as he dismounted in front of his office after the unsuccessful pursuit. "We'll put

a dead or alive reward on him. We'll shoot him on sight. We'll make him wish to hell he'd never been born."

"Ain't it against the law to put a dead or alive reward on a gent unless he's committed a murder?" A man in the crowd asked.

"The hell it is!" Mart Kelsey barked. "He'll be resistin' arrest, won't he? And, if a bank robber resists arrest, ain't it right to shoot him? Git out some reward posters, Ben—a thousand bucks, dead or alive. Then shoot him on sight!"

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BUT the Kelseys didn't shoot anybody. They wasted a lot of time, rode over a lot of territory, but always came home looking as though they'd been caught stealing a sheep. Folks in Salinas began to snicker and grin. The high-handed, big-mouthed Kelsey clan wasn't doing so well. Ben and Pete came home, each with a bullet through a shoulder and admitted that they had Curt Pardo cornered but that he'd winged both of them and gotten away.

"Hell's bells and panther tracks!" Sheriff Mart Kelsey raged. "What are you, a bunch of sissies? Can't nobody git that chicken-livered Pardo?"

Young Duke Kelsey, tall and lanky, his long legs crossed, engrossed in peeling his finger nails with a big-bladed knife, announced casually, "I can get him."

Old Mart whirled. Everybody stared at young Kelsey. Everybody knew he was the best shot, the best tracker, the best rider, just about the best everything, in the Kelsey clan. Even the best at keeping his mouth shut. But, like Curt Pardo, Duke had never taken part in the feud.

"I don't see anything about a Pardo that makes 'em so low-down," Duke said. "An' I can't see anything about the Kelsey outfit that makes 'em so high an' mighty. As long as Pardo leaves me alone I'll leave him alone."

But everybody knew that that wasn't the reason Duke hadn't fought. Duke was a realist—cold, hard and selfish. He had no heart, unless it was stone. Duke never did anything unless there was money in it. Now there was money in this—a thousand dollars.

Duke clicked his big knife shut and put it in his pocket. When he stood up you could see the litheness and the hidden strength of him. He said coolly, without rancor, "I kept out of this for a long time. Especially when Curt married Lillie I didn't want no truck with it. But now it's different. I figger that Pardo hurt my sister when he robbed the bank. He had his chance and he didn't make good at it. He couldn't make the grade and had to git low-down and snaky and steal something he could make by the sweat of his brow. So I'll bring him back throwed over the rump of a bronc. Swear me in. I aim to kill him legal."

Later, Duke Kelsey jogged down the street and across the basin. An old-timer outside the sheriff's office shook his head and crowed to a jasper beside him, "Curt Pardo is sure 'nuff as good as got. He's got his hide stretched out on a fence to dry already, exceptin' he don't know it."

The other shook his head. "I wouldn't count on that too much," he opined, "Curt an' Duke are two of a kind. Quiet an' close-mouthed, an' savin' their energy for doin' instead of talkin'. They never did take no part in the Kelsey-Pardo feud. But now that they're started, watch out. Th' fur is gonna fly. When they meet up, hell is gonna pop. You'll see th' hell-fire an' smell th' brimstone all th' way from th' Terlinguas clean down to Salinas!"

Duke Kelsey, even after he got out into the wild country, didn't hurry. He knew that haste wouldn't catch a hombre like Curt Pardo. He'd taken a lot of time to size Curt up; he'd watched how he'd operated when the rest of the Kelsey clan had hunted him. Now Duke knew that these fast riding, frenzied forays would do no good. To get Curt Pardo you'd have to find his trail and stick to it like a bloodhound. Give him no rest, wear him out, run him to a frazzle—then close in on him.

Curt Pardo saw Duke coming from his hide-out in the hills, where he had been waiting for a chance to get down to where Lillie was waiting at the ranchhouse. But the Kelseys had men posted

down there. Curt cursed softly, turned his pony and headed into the badlands, the big wolf-dog trotting at his heels.

Curt didn't permit Duke to get close enough so that he could see who was chasing him. He didn't know it was Duke. But he did know that it was somebody with a lot of trail sabe. Curt discovered that when he failed to throw Duke off the trail by a few little tricks that had fooled the rest of the Kelseys.

Duke clung like a leech. His eyes saw tracks where there were no tracks. It seemed as though he could smell the trail Curt Pardo hid so cleverly. Always, day and night, he was back there, a dot that wouldn't stop, a shadow, a ghost, a lean, inhuman hound with his nose to the ground.

Curt tried everything. He circled. He doubled back on his tracks and hid in the brush and watched Duke ride past. Then, in a little while, the wolf-dog growled, hackles raised, green eyes aglow, and he knew that Duke was sneaking up on him from behind.

Curt tried speed. He ran his long-coupled cow pony as fast as he could. He nearly broke its heart; he rode it till its wiry legs trembled. But it was no use. Duke Kelsey was there, coming with that inexorable certainty that brought the blazing sun up from behind the peaks each morning. He was always there. Nothing could stop him. . . .

A haunted light crept in to replace the blaze in Curt Pardo's sunken eyes. He was lean, gaunt and tired, and there were deep lines of fatigue about his tight-pressed lips. His pony stumbled often. The dog, Queen, foot-sore, moved with a slow, painful limp. Reaching the hills, Curt looked back and saw that Duke was nearer. Curt stopped. He muttered to himself, "I never killed a man. I'd hoped I'd never have to. But I reckon this is it." He dismounted and patted his pony's neck. "You did a good job, pal," he muttered. "Much obliged."

He scratched Queen's long, pointed ears and watched the green flame jump into her eyes as the soft *click* of a pony's hoofs sounded on the rocky trail. He said, "It might not be in the books to give a Kelsey an even break, but that's what *we* have to do. We couldn't live with ourselves if we didn't do that, could we?"

Queen growled and faced the direction of the hoof-sound. Curt faced about, his right hand loose and limp at his side. Duke Kelsey came around the bend in the trail, his lean body straight, his gray eyes squinted as he watched the tracks in the trail ahead. He moved like a snake as Curt Pardo's form came into view. His hand swept down and up. Pardo's hand flickered. The bright sun glinted on gunmetal. A split second before the two guns roared, Queen growled deep in her throat—and launched herself at Duke Kelsey.

"Down, Queen!" Pardo yelled.

But he was too late. The dog crumpled while in the air, then fell to the ground. Duke Kelsey, knocked out of the saddle, struck the ground on his side. His gun flew out of his hand.

Curt stepped forward, picked up Duke's gun and threw it back among the rocks. He stared for a moment at Duke's lean, expressionless features.

Kelsey's voice was as devoid of expression as his face. "You win," he said. "Go ahead and finish it!"

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CURT PARDO didn't answer. He stooped and picked up the dog and carried it to a grassed plot beside the trail. He put a compress on the wound in its side. Finished, he came and stood over Duke.

"I'll fix you up," he said tonelessly. "You're bleeding pretty bad."

Anger flared in Duke's eyes. "To hell with you!"

Curt shook his head. "I can't let you lay here and die. I'll get some bandages. If you won't let me fix that hole in you peaceable, I'll bat you over the head with a gun barrel and do it while you're asleep. After all, you're a human being, even if you are a Kelsey!"

Duke sneered. "An' you're a dirty thief, which is what all the Pardos ever were!"

With a white rag in his hand, Curt turned from his saddlebags. "A thief!" he brayed. "My God! You have the guts to mention that name? That's all

the Kelseys have ever been. That's all they've done, is steal all the stock I had. Mart Kelsey had to make good his brag that I couldn't make a living for his daughter, so he had my cattle rustled.

"I tracked the rustlers to your uncle Lew's ranch. I made him pay off what my cattle were worth. That's the only way I could get it, so I did it. I took eight thousand dollars from him. I'm going to keep it in spite of you and all the Kelseys on earth. Lillie and I are going to start over where there won't be any damn fool feuds. Now lay still, or do I knock you out?"

Duke Kelsey didn't answer, but the resignation that settled in his eyes made Curt Pardo smile a little and reach out to cut the blood-soaked cloth away from the hip wound. Coolly, impersonally, paying no attention to the sweat that popped out on Duke's brow, he fished for the bullet. He got it, cleansed the wound and bound it. When he finished Kelsey's eyes were closed, his teeth were clenched tight, and there was no blood in his lips.

Curt stepped back. "It's done," he said. "You might have a stiff hip all the rest of your life. If you don't have, you can thank me."

Duke Kelsey's eyes came slowly open, a lot of hate in them. "Or mebby I can thank you for puttin' the bullet there in the first place," he said slowly.

"For that," Pardo flared, "thank th' Kelsey that started the feud!"

Curt Pardo moved over and squatted beside Queen. He patted her gently, stroked the silky fur of her head. He talked soothingly to her, promising that she would get well. He rose and moved out of sight and pretty soon there was a shot and Curt came back with a rabbit. He cleaned it, built a fire and cooked the rabbit in a pan he took from a saddlebag. He fed the dog some broth with a spoon, and when he'd finished he took a piece of the rabbit for himself and handed one to Duke.

"I take seconds from the dog," Duke said sarcastically. "What she don't want, I git. That it?"

A cold gleam came into Curt Pardo's eyes. "You're damn right that's it!" he snapped. "She's better than you are. In fact she's better than either of us. She didn't have to be asked to offer her life for me. She did it because she wanted to, because there's not a selfish bone in her body, Kelsey. She'd do it again, right now, if she was able to get onto her feet. She'd do it if she knew she'd die the next minute. But that's something you wouldn't understand. I reckon no Kelsey could."

"That's like your cock-and-bull story about Lew stealin' your cattle," Kelsey sneered. "You used the first alibi to steal money. You'll use this one as an excuse to starve me to death when you rake up nerve enough to do it. You'll do it because you don't have the guts to shoot me."

Curt favored Duke with a pitying stare —then ignored him. And Kelsey lay there and sneered, figuring that Pardo was doing a nice piece of acting. Everybody had excuses to offer when they couldn't make the grade. Pardo's was that Lew Kelsey had stolen his cattle. Everybody had to have an excuse when they made another human suffer. Pardo's would be the dog, when the time was ripe. . . .

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THE sun sank and the shadows embraced the tiny camp. Curt built a fire and stayed up all night, looking after the dog. Duke, his wound paining fiercely, cat-napped once in a while. But each time he opened his eyes, Curt was there, stroking Queen's head, speaking soothingly to her. In the morning, Padro went after rabbits again. He repeated his process of the day before. He fed the broth to the dog. Then he took

If you like the salty style of this yarn, you'll want to read more by the same author. Don't miss Pearsol's "Die for Texas, You Traitor!"—a novelette of heartache and heroism on Sam Houston's fighting line—in June BIG-BOOK WESTERN! On sale April 17th!

a piece of rabbit for himself and gave one to Duke.

After that first day Curt didn't speak to Duke. He didn't appear to know the other man was on earth, except at mealtime, and once a day when he looked at Duke's wound. That was routine every day. But as the days dragged on, the rabbits grew scarce. Either Curt was killing them all off or they were beginning to know that there was danger at that mountain water hole.

The first day that Curt came in without a rabbit, he hunkered beside the dog and fed her some broth left over from the day before. Duke waited, and when Curt put the pan away he asked, "What about us?"

"We don't eat today," Curt said.

Duke sneered. So here it was starting. This was where the dirty work began. The sneaking Pardo had gotten himself a rabbit out in the hills, had filled his own belly and came in to lie like a dirty dog about having gotten no game.

That night Curt again left to hunt. Duke Kelsey smiled crookedly. He rolled over on his belly and started to crawl, hunting for the gun Curt had thrown away. He found it, thrust it inside his shirt and crawled along in the direction Curt had gone. Atop a rise, Duke looked down on the water hole. The moonlight revealed Curt Pardo lying behind some brush, a gun in his fist, waiting for a rabbit. Finally one came. Curt's gun blasted. The rabbit jumped up in the air and then raced away when it came down. Curt got to his feet and started to look for it, but Duke knew that he'd missed. Curt wouldn't find it.

Pardo came back after a while and lay down behind the brush again. No rabbits came. Duke crawled back to the camp and lay on his pallet of blankets. Soon Curt came in and he had no rabbit. Duke had known he wouldn't have, because he'd heard no other shot.

Curt heated some broth and fed some to the dog while Duke lay there, his eyes half closed, pretending to be asleep. Finished with Queen, Curt took a piece of rabbit from a pan and came toward Duke. He reached down and touched Duke on the shoulder, extended the meat. "Here," he said, "I got a rabbit last night."

Duke reached up and took it. He asked, "What about yours?"

"I ate my share while you were asleep," Curt said.

Duke began to eat the rabbit. He frowned. What the hell kind of a jasper was this Pardo anyway. He hadn't killed a rabbit. He hadn't eaten any. The only way he could have had any left was by saving a part of his own share from two days ago. That meant that Curt hadn't eaten anything for two days. But here he was, giving his last bite to a wounded Kelsey. Under his breath, Kelsey swore.

As Duke munched the meat, Curt said, "The meat is getting scarce around here. I'll be able to take the dog away in a little while, now. You think you'll be able to travel pretty soon? How's your hip?"

Kelsey moved a little and turned on a false expression of pain.

"I don't know how long it will be," he said. "Not very long." He didn't want to tackle Pardo just yet. He didn't want to take the gun and chance a showdown until he would be able to ride to Salinas.

"I'll wait till you're able to travel," Curt said.

Duke thought, "Sure. And when I'm able to travel—you'll go in with me!"

He waited . . . and the wound gradually healed. The rabbits grew more scarce. Pardo's face was lined, his eyes sunken. He was skin and bones; a queer light glowed in his eyes as he took his gun and went out to hunt for food.

Kelsey, lying there, playing possum, was not wasting any energy. He didn't lose the weight that Curt did. But he was hungry, hungry as hell. He was so hungry that his mind didn't work just right and all this seemed queer and unreal. He'd find himself going over the things Curt Pardo had said, arguing with him about them, talking aloud while Curt was away and there was nobody there to hear him.

"Alibis," he muttered, over and over again. "Sayin' that Lew Kelsey rustled your cattle. You're a damned liar. You're a sneak and a thief. You're worth a thousand buck on the hoof. You married my sister and let her down. You developed into a dirty bank robber, then

blamed it on somebody else. You pulled some kind of a hocus-pocus that time you didn't eat and gave me the piece of rabbit. A thievin' Pardo wouldn't do that. You pulled some kind of a crooked game there. What was it?"

Then Pardo would shuffle into camp with no game. He'd hunker beside the dog, and Queen would whine and lick his hand. Duke would slide his hand inside his shirt to let his fingers curl about the gun that snuggled there. He'd think of murder. He'd wonder what dog meat tasted like.

Through the haze of unreality Duke Kelsey heard Curt Pardo talking to him.

"We're going to have to pull out," Curt husked, his sunken eyes appraising Duke. "There's no more meat. We're sunk if we stay another day. We'll have to leave now."

Kelsey's brain seemed asleep. He heard Pardo only vaguely. He seemed to think of the past, not of the present. He recalled the long feud between the Pardo and the Kelsey clans. He recalled how upright and honest and glorious all the Kelseys were supposed to be, and how low-down the Pardos. And how Curt had married Lillie and let her down when he'd robbed a bank. He remembered the thousand dollars. He thought of the long chase he'd run to track Pardo to earth. And now he had him, here, before him, while he, Duke Kelsey, had a gun inside his shirt.

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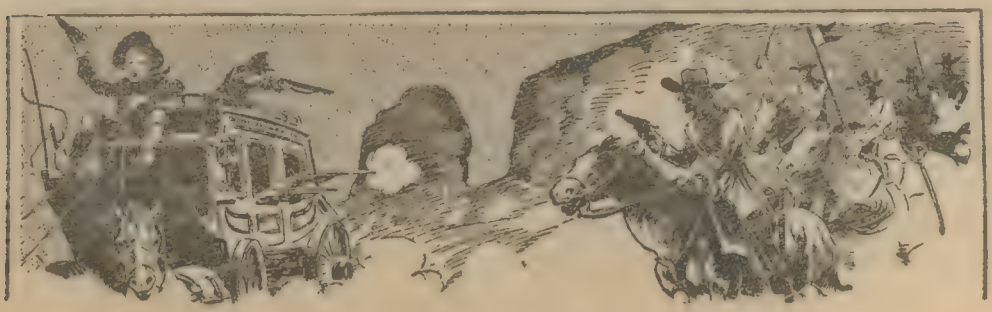
SLOWLY Duke pushed himself to his feet. He slid his hand inside his shirt as Curt Pardo turned his back to saddle the horses. The hidden gun came into view, Duke's thumb on the wide checkered hammer flange. Dimly, Kelsey recalled the many men who had died in this long-standing feud. But this would be the last. This Pardo.

Pardo said, without turning, "I'll ride with you till we're in sight of town, where you're sure you can make it."

Eyes fastened on the middle of Pardo's back, Duke Kelsey lowered the gun. He looked down at the dog, Queen, better now, but still not able to walk; the dog Pardo had gone hungry to feed. He looked at Pardo again and remembered the piece of rabbit Curt had given him, and the lie he'd told about eating his share while Duke had slept. . . .

Suddenly Kelsey raised the gun in his hand high up over his head and threw it far out among the rocks. Curt turned at the sound and stared at Duke. Then he looked and saw the gun laying in the sunlight. A soft smile touched Curt's lips. He shuffled toward Duke and held out his hand. "I wondered where it was. I looked for it and couldn't find it. I'm glad you got it and that you threw it away. Among real men, Duke, there's no use for guns. Lillie and I are going to a place like that, where there'll be no hates and no feuds and no killings. Since you chucked the gun away, that's where you belong, too. We'd like to have you, Lillie and me."

Suddenly Kelsey gripped Pardo's hand. He found a strange thrill in watching Curt pick up the dog and carry her in his arms to the saddle. Duke reached out and stroked Queen's head and she turned and licked his hand. It was the second touch of friendship he'd had that he could remember in all his cold, hard life. It was good. He smiled and said, "I'll get Lillie, Curt. I'd like to go with you. I'd like it a lot."



The space between the two men closed slowly. . . Bill Silver's gaze never wavered from the other.

The Hero Who Couldn't Quit

By JACK BLOODHART

For twenty years, Bill Silver and his silver-mounted guns had stood for honest, courageous law. Yet, while murder and robbery ran riot on his home-town streets, and his boyhood friends damned him for a coward, Bill hung up his Colts to rust, praying for the peace and quiet he craved —and a few extra years of the life he feared and detested!

LIKE a prairie fire, starting with a tiny tongue of flame, leaping and running through the grass until it became a roaring wall of flame, the news ran its course. From the *brasada* to Santa Fe, from Santa Fe to the Three Forks, the whisper sped "Bill Silver's through! Bill Silver's quit!"

Hearing the whisper, bearded, furtive-eyed men came out of their hideouts, strapped on their guns, and learned to swagger again. Hearing it, half a dozen towns burst into lawlessness once more. Now they had nothing to fear from Bill Silver, who had tamed them. Those famous silver-mounted guns of his would not lash out at them again. . . .

Law-abiding men grieved, and shook their heads. Bill Silver through? Too bad. Lawmen like Bill Silver were not easily come by.

And what of Bill Silver? As the whisper reached its zenith, he sat his horse on the outskirts of a small, dusty town, looking at the place, remembering. For this town was San Saba—and, to Bill Silver, San Saba meant home.

He sat there a long time, and as the sun began to lower and long shadows crept upon San Saba, Bill Silver stirred himself and rode into the town. The silver-mounted sixguns at his waist caught and reflected the rays of the dying sun as he rode.

Riding slowly down the main street, Bill Silver peered through the deepening dusk, searching out familiar landmarks, well remembered places. He saw them, and felt glad, but he saw other things, too, that showed him how San Saba had grown. No longer was it the sleepy little cowtown he had known. Gladness and sorrow both touched him; but above all he felt a deep and satisfying content at being home.

There stood the Commercial House, looking a little seedy and run-down, from what he could see of it; there the bank, the Wells-Fargo office, and Charley Wong's cafe. Charley must be a hundred years old. Bill smiled to himself. Seeing Wong's had reminded him that he was hungry. He stopped, tied up at the hitchrack and went into the cafe.

One other diner sat at the counter, awaiting his meal. He turned as Bill Silver came in. He peered at the lawman, his eyes widening, and then leaped from his seat.

"Bill! Bill Silver!"

Bill Silver stared, for a moment unable to recognize the man in the poor light of the cafe. Then his face broke into a wide grin and he thrust out a lean, brown hand.

"Jeff!" He took the other's hand, squeezed it tight. "Jeff, you old mud turtle! It's good to see you!"

Jeff Malone took Silver's arm, led him to the counter. "Sit down, sit down. By cripes, this calls for a celebration. Wong!" He raised his voice in a shout. "Wong, you yellow heathen, come out here!"

From the kitchen in back, an aged and wrinkled Celestial padded into view.

"Wong, look what the wind blew in!" Jeff Malone cried. "D'yuh know who this ugly lookin' galoot is?"

Wong stared hard at Bill, his seamed face breaking into a wide smile. "The silver one! A thousand welcomes home." He thrust out a wrinkled hand and Bill took it, smiling his pleasure.

"Wong," Jeff Malone said, "dish out the best yuh got. It's on me, an' the best ain't none too good for Bill Silver."

The Chinaman bowed. "Begging pardon of good-for-nothing marshal, this on Wong! You wait."

He shuffled back to the kitchen, and Bill Silver turned to Malone. "Did I hear him call you marshal, Jeff? You the law in San Saba?"

A cloud crossed Jeff Malone's face, erased almost before Bill Silver saw it. "Yeah, I am, Bill. But, hell, we ain't gonna talk about that." He paused a moment. "We heard you was quittin' the law trails, Bill, but we shore never figgered you'd be comin' back to San Saba. Wait'll Dave an' Joe and Shorty an' the rest of 'em hear it. Bill, you're a sight for sore eyes. . . ."

Their meal, the finest product of Wong's art, and eaten under his pleased celestial smile, finished, Jeff Malone conducted Bill out into San Saba's main street. "Come on, son, we're goin' up to the Commercial House. Dave Lake's runnin' it now."

They turned that way, walking slowly, Bill Silver savoring the feel of the old town. But, somehow, it felt different. For a moment Silver could not place the feeling, and then suddenly he knew. It was a feeling he'd had before, when he'd walked the streets of a lawless town, a town he'd come to tame.

They passed a large saloon, a place Bill didn't remember. "This one's new," he said.

"Yeah," Jeff Malone replied levelly.

"It's the Deuces Wild, run by Cass Carr. You'll—uh—you'll hear more about Cass Carr when yuh've been here a while."

They went on, presently turned and climbed the steps of the Commercial House and entered its faded, musty lobby. A lone man behind the desk looked up, stared a moment, then his face split with a wide grin.

"Bill!" He came around the desk to greet them, and gripped Silver's hand. "When I heard you was quittin', I wondered if you'd come back. Welcome home, Bill!"

"Thanks, Dave. It's mighty good to be here."

"Jeff," Dave Lake said, "leave Bill here an' go get Shorty and Joe an' the rest. I'll bust open a bottle of my private stock. This calls for a round on the house."

The marshal left on his errand and Dave turned to Bill Silver. "We'll go upstairs to my room, Bill. The others'll come up. It's about the only place they do go of a night any more."

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THE staircase, worn and paint-peeled, was in keeping with the rest of the Commercial House. Bill stumbled on the bottom step.

"Light's rotten in here," Dave Lake said. "Not that it matters much."

In Dave's room they toasted each other with the hotel keeper's private stock. Dave Lake seemed to have something on his mind, but did not express it, and presently Jeff Malone returned with four more men in tow, all boyhood cronies of Bill Silver's.

They shook hands hard, cussing to hide their feelings: Joe and Shorty and Ed and Bart, getting gray now, a little old, a little slow, just as Bill Silver was showing the years. But he still was the leanest, hardest, deadliest of the lot—a lawman whose very name could still strike fear to any outlaw's heart.

They chinned for an hour, telling lies and laughing at them, recounting experiences of the old days that were far behind them now. But for all their joviality and banter, Bill Silver, acutely perceptive as he was, felt an undertow of something else in the group, some fear, some sinister force that never would quite let them shed their restraint, their underlying caution.

It was Dave Lake who spoke the thought uppermost in the minds of all: "How come you quit the law, Bill? How come you're through?"

They were silent, awaiting his answer, looking at him as though what he might say now was the most important thing in the world.

Bill Silver smiled. "I'm gettin' old, boys. I guess I'm a little tired." He had shucked his twin-holster gun belt, tossed it on Dave's bed. He nodded toward it. "The old guns were gettin' a little heavy. The trails were gettin' lonesome."

They nodded, understanding, but something like disappointment showed on their faces.

Again Dave Lake spoke for them. "Bill," he said, clearing his throat, "Bill, you're one of the greatest lawmen the West ever had. You been that for twenty years. You still are. Bill—San Saba needs you."

The room fell quiet. They looked at Bill Silver. He returned their looks, squinting through the smoke-haze hanging in the room. His gaze seemed to rest longest on Jeff Malone, marshal of San Saba.

Jeff flushed. "What they're tryin' to tell you, Bill, is that San Saba is in the hands of a gang of bloody crooks led by Cass Carr, who runs the Deuces Wild. I showed you the joint. What they're also tryin' to say is that the town marshal—that's me, Bill—is a fumbling old fool who can't do anything."

They protested, but Jeff Malone waved them to silence. "It's true," he said flatly. "An' you rannihans know it." He lifted one hand and rubbed it across the star on his worn vest. "I ain't no more fit to wear this hunk of tin than—than a ten-year-old kid!" He turned abruptly on Silver. "Bill, we need those guns of yours to help clean up this town. Can we have 'em?"

Silence stood heavy in the room while they watched him, awaiting his answer. Bill Silver got up, peering at them, and then he shook his head slowly.

"I'm sorry, boys. I've hung up my guns. I'm through with lawin', with fightin', with everything but settlin' down to a little peace an' quiet."

The breaths of his listeners ran out in gusts of disappointment, but Bill Silver

shut his ears, slowly paced the length of the room, putting one foot carefully in front of the other as he talked. "For twenty years I've ridden through gunsmoke an' flyin' lead, servin' the law. Twenty years. That's a long time—a long time to be watchin' both front an' back, always wonderin' when bushwhack lead would catch up with you.

"Now I'm tired. All I want is to stay here in San Saba, peaceful-like. My guns are through talkin'."

The silence that followed his words ran on for a full minute, to be shattered by all of them talking at once, protesting.

Jeff Malone held up his hand to quiet them. "Wait a minute, you loud-talkin' galoots. Bill's right. His life ain't been no damned picnic. He's deservin' of whatever peace an' quiet he kin find."

That calmed them, coming from Jeff, but the spell of Bill Silver's homecoming was broken, and restraint settled down upon the little group. They were disappointed, plainly; perhaps even a little angry at Bill's refusal to help them clean up San Saba. Not long after that the gathering broke up, and they said their goodnights, shaking hands with Bill Silver, allowing they'd see him around, repeating their welcome home. But it wasn't the same, somehow, as when they'd welcomed him earlier, and Bill Silver wished with all his heart that he did not have to refuse his help.

"Dave," he said to the hotel keeper, "until I find a permanent place to live, I'll need a room here."

"The best in the place, Bill," Dave told him, taking Bill's arm as they left the room. "Which ain't none too good," he added wryly.

He showed Bill a front room, large, clean, furnished with shabby but comfortable furniture.

"It's yours for as long as you want it, Bill," Dave Lake said, "—on the house."

"Thanks, Dave. I appreciate that. There ain't much money in lawin'. What I've got has tuh last me a long time." He stood in the center of the room, holding his gun belt with the silver-mounted guns in their worn holsters. His eyes searched the room.

Dave Lake watched him quizzically. "Lookin' for somethin'?"

"Just thought there might be a nail in the wall, to hang this on."

"Sure, there's a nail, right in front of yuh. Hang 'em up."

Bill Silver found the nail, hung up his guns, and both men stood a moment staring at them.

Dave Lake, ready to go, paused in the doorway. "Bill," he said, "I agree with Jeff. You—you got a right to a little peace an' quiet. I guess you've done your share."

When Dave had gone, Bill Silver crossed the room to the big window and stood looking out into San Saba's main street. He stood there for a long time, unmoving. Finally he shucked off his clothes and climbed into bed. A vagrant moonbeam coming into the room struck reflections from the silver-mounted guns on the wall. Bill Silver turned his head away, shutting out the sight of them.

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WORD spread like wildfire through San Saba that Bill Silver had come back, and as he walked the streets the next day he was stopped every few minutes to be shaken by the hand and welcomed home. He sensed, behind many of the words spoken to him, the thoughts that had been expressed aloud by his closest friends the night before. Would Bill Silver unleash his guns in defense of San Saba?

But the question was not asked again, and Bill Silver was glad. Perhaps the very sight of him without his guns furnished all the answer they needed.

In mid-afternoon, overcome by curiosity to see the man who ran it, Bill Silver turned into the Deuces Wild. It was large and ornate, but Bill Silver wasn't impressed. He had seen many large and ornate barrooms, and had cleaned out more than one. The Deuces Wild was no different than any of the others.

A dozen or so men were gathered in the Deuces Wild already, lounging at the bar or sitting at the tables. They looked up when he came in, and a hoarse whisper reached his ears: "That's him! That's Bill Silver!"

He stood up to the bar and ordered a beer. The barkeep regarded him with interest as he served the drink, but offered

no comment. As he drank, Silver felt the eyes of the men in the place on him, and wished for a moment that he had worn his guns. He remembered then that that part was finished, over with. The guns hung on a nail in the hotel room wall.

Someone came over and stood beside him at the bar. Bill turned slowly. He saw a big, hook-nosed man with a shock of reddish hair and slim, gambler's hands. He was expensively dressed, and had bulges under his armpits that indicated shoulder-holstered guns. His eyes, pale, liquid and ice-cold, never remained still; his mouth was a thin line in his face. Bill had no doubt that this was Cass Carr, gambler and saloon owner.

"So you're Bill Silver?" Carr said, in a smooth voice, pitched slightly higher than normal. "I heard you were in town. I'm glad you came in here. Saved me lookin' for you."

Bill Silver turned to face him fully. "Lookin' for me?" His craggy, sun-browned face bore no expression as he regarded Carr through slightly squinted eyes.

"Yeah," Carr said, "lookin' for you. Just to tell you that yore rep don't scare me none. In case you don't know it, I'm Cass Carr. That mean anything to you?"

Bill Silver shook his head slowly. "No. Nothing."

"Good. Just remember, I'm running this place, an' anything else I take a fancy to. I don't want no busted-down has-been tin-star tryin' to bother me."

The Deuces Wild was very quiet. Bill Silver knew what all of them, including Cass Carr, expected him to say. He smiled to himself, recognizing that his reputation *must* scare Carr, otherwise the bellicose saloonman wouldn't be making such an issue of it. But it didn't matter. Not now. That part was finished.

"I'm not aimin' to bother you," Bill Silver said, and to every man in the place his words meant he was backing down. He turned abruptly and left the Deuces Wild. A raucous laugh followed him out of the place as he stubbed the toe of his boot on the door sill.

"Looks like he won't make no trouble fer you, Cass!" someone shouted. "I dunno why anybody'd be scared uh him!"

The laughter trailed him down the street. Bill Silver walked with eyes straight ahead, unseeing, trying to hold down the emotions boiling inside him. No use to get too riled up. Just keep away from the Deuces Wild. Keep away from situations that made his supple hands itch with the urge to feel his silver-mounted guns leaping into action.

Tired, he returned to the Commercial House and to his room. Lying down, the ex-lawman closed his eyes, wondering if he should have come back to San Saba. Had he known the situation here, he might have stayed away until things quieted down. But where else could he have gone? Here was the town of his boyhood, here the friends of his youth. Here, he had thought, would be the peaceful end of a bloody trail. It had been comforting, knowing there remained San Saba to return to.

But now the town needed him, and he could not give his help. Getting up, Bill Silver sat on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands, wondering. . . .

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THEY sat in the dingy, dusty little room that served Jeff Malone as an office, saying little, as only old friends can sit together without the necessity of words between them.

Outside, San Saba swirled and eddied up and down the main street; faintly from the Deuces Wild came the tinny notes of a piano, played with more noise than artistry. Talk, laughter, raucous shouts drifted in from the street.

They had sat there the better part of an hour, when the door opened suddenly and a disheveled young man burst in. Anger and fear showed in his flushed face. His breath came hard.

"Which one of you's the marshal?" he demanded, and then seeing the star on Malone's vest, addressed him directly.

"I've been robbed," he said, his voice unsteady, "in the crookedest game I ever sat in—over at the Deuces Wild. I want something done about it."

Jeff Malone regarded him wearily. "What d'you want done?"

"What do I want done?" The stranger stared in amazement. "Why, dammit, I want my money back, and a stop put to

that gang of thieves over there. What do you think I'd want done?"

"You're new here," Jeff said matter-of-factly.

"What of it? Are strangers fair game in this stinking town? I just got in from the East, and I must say this is a hell of a welcome. They threatened to kill me."

Jeff Malone shot a glance at Bill Silver. Silver stared straight ahead, seemingly uninterested in the conversation. His only sign of emotion was the constant drumming of his fingers on the chair arm.

"Well?" the stranger demanded.

Jeff Malone got up slowly. "I'll go back with you," he said levelly, buckling on his gun belt. "The showdown might as well be tonight as any time. Want to come, Bill?"

Silver squinted up at him, shook his head. "No, Jeff. Not this time."

Jeff Malone flushed; a look akin to contempt flashed across his face. "Just as you say, Bill," he said heavily, a slight curl to his lip that spoke his thoughts more eloquently than words. "I won't be back here," he said. "I'm goin' home when I'm through at the Deuces Wild."

Bill Silver nodded, holding his expression steady by an effort. The implication in Jeff's tone was plain. He watched them out the door, and when they had gone, followed them into the street and turned toward the Commercial House.

Dave Lake wasn't there, and Bill climbed the stairs to his room tiredly. He shut the door and leaned heavily against it. The moon and the street light outside filled the room with a pale glow, so he did not bother with a lamp. His step, as he approached the bed, was that of an old man. Wearily he lay down, closed his eyes against the glint of the silver-mounted sixes on the wall. . . .

He must have dozed. The slow tramp of booted feet in the hall awakened him with a start. He listened an instant, and sat up straight as a knock sounded on his door.

"Come in," he called, getting to his feet and fumbling for the lamp. The door opened as the flame in the lamp climbed, filling the room with flickering shadows. Bill stared as Dave Lake came into the room, followed by Ed and Joe Bates. In their arms the Bates brothers carried Jeff Malone—the marshal of San Saba.

Without speaking, they laid Jeff on Bill's rumpled bed. When they had made him comfortable, they stepped back, looking at Bill Silver.

"He ain't dead," Dave Lake said tonelessly, "but he's dyin'. He asked us to bring him here."

His face stiff as carved stone, Bill Silver went to the bedside, stared at Jeff Malone. Slowly the old marshal opened his eyes.

"Cass Carr got me, Bill," he said faintly, "when I—tried tuh help that cussed tenderfoot. Bill, I asked the boys tuh bring —me here—" He coughed, a trickle of blood seeping from his mouth. His eyes were fast glazing. "—Tuh bring me here —so I could ask you—to help San Saba—take up the fight, Bill . . ." Jeff struggled to say more, but speech was ended. His body arched suddenly, and then relaxed, the life running out of it.

For a full minute not a sound stirred in the room. The three men who had brought him stared at Jeff Malone, their eyes pinched, hating to believe that a life-long friend had gone. And then, as if by a prearranged signal, all three turned to Bill Silver.

He stepped back from the bedside, reading their thoughts.

"You heard what he asked, Bill," Dave Lake said quietly.

Fists clenched at his sides, Bill Silver nodded. "I heard," he said harshly, his face a mask. "The answer is no. My guns are put away. I'm through with them."

Needing no more answer than that, they picked up Jeff's body, started away with it. At the door Dave Lake turned.

"I'll need this room in the mornin'. See that you're out of it. You might as well get clear out—of San Saba. This town doesn't need any more high-priced yellow-bellies."

Then they were gone, slamming the door behind them. Bill Silver stood staring at it, his face twisted with the tearing grief that ran riot through him.

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HAGGARD, unshaven, Bill Silver left the Commercial House at dawn. The street was deserted, for which he was thankful. At Charley

Wong's, he aroused the Chinaman and got his breakfast. Charley's wrinkled face revealed nothing as he served the lawman, but as he watched Bill eat, slowly, as a condemned man might, Wong's face softened. He refused payment for the breakfast.

"Take it, Wong," Silver snapped. "I want no charity from you or anybody else." He flung the money on the counter, turned to go.

"Bill," Charley said, and when Silver turned, Wong looked into his eyes. "I know," he said softly. "Only a fool fights when he has not the weapons. Like the tenderfoot last night. Carr kill him, too."

Silver steadied himself on the counter. "That greenhorn," he murmured, half to himself. "That greenhorn braced Carr. Good God!" Abruptly he turned, went blindly out of the restaurant.

Wong shook his head sorrowfully as he watched Silver turn back toward the Commercial House.

Dave Lake stood behind the desk, yawning. He glanced up in surprise as Bill came in, then blanked his features and looked down at the ledger in front of him.

Bill Silver went straight to the desk. "You get word to Carr," he said tightly, "to be in the street in front of the Deuces Wild at noon. Tell him I'm comin' to kill him."

Dave Lake's mouth fell open, but before he could speak Bill had turned his back and was climbing the stairs toward his room. . . .

The clock behind the Commercial House desk said five minutes until noon when Bill Silver left the place and walked down the steps into the street. Around his waist the silver-mounted guns gleamed in the noonday sun.

San Saba lay quiet, with the stillness of death. There was no movement, no sound, from the men who crowded the sidewalks. Even the breeze was stilled, not a leaf quivering in the heavy, torpid heat.

Reaching the center of the street, Bill Silver paused an instant, then started toward the Deuces Wild. He walked slowly, mechanically, and when he had traversed half the distance a man moved out into the street ahead of him and stood there, waiting. It was Cass Carr.

Bill Silver, squinting through the heat haze, saw the figure ahead, and his body bent slightly, his hands hanging loose and free near the shining guns. His machine-like pace did not falter; he put one foot ahead of the other deliberately, seemingly picking his way. He walked like something inhuman.

The silence around the stalking figure deepened; the sidewalks and doorways were crammed with people, but not a whispering sound issued from them. The act of breathing seemed to have been suspended as that deadly march went on; eyes alone followed him, eyes staring in fascination or clouding in fear.

The space between the two men closed slowly. Closed with the inexorable finality of a clamping vise. Bill Silver's gaze never wavered from the other. He stared straight out ahead, as a blind man might, unwinking.

Bill's unbroken stride brought him closer. Cass Carr ran his tongue over dry lips. Still closer! It did not seem possible that bullets could halt that measured pace. So close now that Cass Carr could see the thin slits of glinting gray between the narrowed eyelids! He was Bill Silver, one of the deadliest of them all. . .

A high-pitched scream split the taut silence. Cass Carr's guns dropped to the dust, his hands clawing skyward. His face was ashen.

"I'm reachin'!" he shrieked—and, turning, he ran for the hitchrail in front of his place. He stumbled, fell, got up again and leaped upon a racked horse. Jerking the tie rein free, he dug heels and spun the animal around, pounding out of San Saba in a swirl of dust.

"My horse!" a yell came from somewhere.

"Let him go! We'll buy yuh another one!"

And with that the town exploded. Men surged out into the street, yelling, firing their guns into the air. A few of them raced for the Deuces Wild, burst through its door, and the town echoed to the noise of crashing guns, breaking glass and splintering wood. It was doomsday for the honkatonk.

But most of them ran straight for Bill Silver, who stood uncertainly in the middle of the street. He had straightened up, now, peering toward the dust cloud raised

by Cass Carr's flight. Shouts and cheers rolled over the lawman; his name thundered from a hundred throats. Men were almost hysterical.

The first man to reach him was Dave Lake. "Bill," Dave cried, thrusting out his hand, "Bill—forgive a damned old fool for talkin' like he did!"

Bill Silver ignored the hotel man's hand. Instantly a tense hush settled upon the crowd; a slow flush crept across Dave Lake's face.

Then, as if he had just seen Dave's hand, Bill took it. The hotel keeper gripped hard, pulling the lawman toward him. He looked intently into Bill Silver's eyes. Dave whitened, his mouth opened, but for an instant no words came.

"Good God!" he whispered huskily. "Bill!" His voice lifted raspingly. "Bill! Your eyes! You're blind! You—you can't see!"

A tremor shook the onlookers. Someone swore feelingly. *"Blind!"* The word echoed through the crowd in a tense, horrified whisper.

Bill Silver shook his head slowly, smiling. "No, Dave," he said quietly, "not blind—just goin' blind. The doc said maybe it'd stop here, maybe it'd never get worse. But I couldn't've hit Carr with a load of grape shot."

"An' you stood up to him! Bill, is there any cure? Is there any way that they can— "

"A slim chance. It'd take more money than I could ever—"

"Money!" Dave Lake shouted. "San Saba'll pay whatever it takes." And the crowd roared approval. "If it can be whipped, we'll whip it," Dave Lake cried. The onlookers crowded in then, pumping Bill's hand, slapping his back, speaking words of encouragement.

He was tired, mighty tired, and his eyes ached fiercely. But hope was higher in him then than it had been for a long time. There was some reason for a little hope, now.

It was worth risking death for, Bill Silver thought, the death that would be preferable to blindness. His hands brushed the butts of his holstered guns. They were empty, both of them. . . .

"COME ON AND FIGHT!"

That was the challenge Fred Meade flung at the wreck of the man he'd once idolized as the greatest flyer in Alaska—the man he'd have been honored to call partner, if the older man had only let him. But Brad Pace had always kept aloof and now—sick, broke and with a murder charge hanging over him—he had given up the battle. So there was only one thing for Meade to do—drag the stubborn old fool back up to the heights again, in spite of everything. Louis C. Goldsmith gives us this great novelette of the blizzard-swept northern airways.

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Adventure

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GUNMEN PAY IN BLOOD

A hammer-and-tongs novelette of a gun whelp's fight for freedom

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

"Callin' cards from Gord!" Gringo yelled, and thumbed his hammer.

How could young Pete Grimes ever again drink and ride with square-shooting men and deaden his ears to a ghost's cries for vengeance, when he worked for thirty a month and found in the murder camp of the Border syndicate—at the beck and call of raiding gunmen who had blasted his dad's charred body into a lonely, shallow prairie grave?

CHAPTER ONE

A Killer Sworn

A LOWERING dawn, a brawling wind and a cowboy posse chased Jake Grimes out of the east and straight to the doubtful haven of his two-bit cow outfit, in the barren hills west of Palomas Valley. Jake was a rustler, a drunken desperado and a coyote killer. He had a bullet hole through his shoulder and his horse was reeling under him. Yet with the dogged stubbornness that was his, and courage of a sort, he continued to haze the half score of leggy colts ahead of him—colts which promised to be expensive loot.

Into the dust-whipped dooryard of his Chain Links spread he whooped his galloping charges. He made a running dismount, fell from weakness, then got up and opened the pasture gate. All the while he was bawling, "Pete! Get outa

that bed, you lazy *pelado!* Git around them colts an' put 'em through this gate, damn you, before—"

The door of the mean cabin popped open and a barefooted boy emerged, his shirt-tail fluttering as he tried to run and buckle his belt at the same time. He got behind the weary colts, hollering shrilly as he drove them through the gate. Pete Grimes was Jake's motherless son. He was seventeen, tall and skinny, with dark, sad eyes, pinched face and bitterly twisted lips. He closed the gate, his eyes snapping as Jake fanned the stolen colts and his own saddler into the trackless hills, with shots that whined over their heads. When they had disappeared, Jake sagged against the corral fence, pale and shaken, his bloodshot eyes searching the dust clouds scudding out of the east.

"Shore have rode hard," he gasped. "Had some trouble an' was forced to kill a man." As he spoke, he held a gun between his knees and cut a nick beside the four already graven in the black walnut handle. He holstered the weapon and said, "Help me inside, Pete. Caught me a slug in the shoulder an' I'm 'most done up."

The boy leaped to his side, threw a slender arm about him. "You orta quit this horse stealin', Pop. We can git along all right without—"

"Preachin' again, eh?" Jake tore loose from the embrace, walked on jelly-like legs to the house. "Hell, you orta get you a hymn book an' a psalter. God knows it's disappointment enough that a son uh mine takes after his ma, let alone the shame of raisin' up a sky pilot. Quit whinin' an' git out that jug. Pour hot water in the basin an' dig out some clean rags."

He reeled inside and Pete was following when the first blushing promise of sunrise glinted off something in the valley below. The dust cloud parted for an instant and he saw the riders—a score of them, spurring hard toward the Chain Links.

"Pop!" Panic hit the boy. "They're comin', a hull passel of 'em. I seen the glint of their guns." He darted across the threshold, slammed and barred the door. Jake's hard palm took him alongside the head, staggering him.

"Quit that caterwaulin'," he brayed. "Don't you think I know they're comin'? Why you reckon I've been runnin'. Snap into it an' do like I told yuh."

While Pete made ready to dress his father's wound, Jake got down several rifles and broke out a supply of cartridges which had been hoarded against just such an emergency. While Pete attended him, Jake sat on a bench, a cigarette in one hand, a tin cup of moonshine in the other. His face was contorted with pain and hate and he was listening, listening. At the first hint of hoofbeats, he said, "Here they come. They'll have a hell of a time ever locatin' them colts. Without them, they got nothin' on me, you savvy? If they holler an' pound on the door, jest keep quiet. Don't answer 'em."

But Jake Grimes figured without the frayed tempers of men made desperate by repeated forays against their herds. There was no searching for the stolen animals. There was nothing so social as a knock upon the door. The minute the riders were in gunshot range they began circling, throwing lead through windows, through the door and through the flimsy board and batten shack.

Jake, hit again, went to the floor, snarling and giving back the fire across the sill of a shattered window. "Hang to the floor, kid," he barked. "An' feed 'em lead for breakfast."

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PETE obeyed silently. This, he knew, was a fight to the death. If they lost, both would be shot to death with as little compunction as if they were stock-killing wolves. He thrust an old .45-70 alongside the window jamb, aimed and fired. He flinched as, through the puff of muzzle smoke, he saw a circling rider pitchpoled over the head of his stricken mount, light, roll and come up running. Pete could have downed him, but withheld the trigger pressure. He had nothing against that cowboy. He was ashamed more than afraid of the issue. Thereafter Pete fired only at the horses, hard enough in itself for one who loved the brutes like he did.

The fight went on. Jake Grimes was tough and he was desperate. The room

rocked to the smash of his big calibre rifle. The room filled with powdersmoke. Loading, firing, cursing his foes, the renegade gave them back slug for slug. Bullets poured into and through the shack, shredding the pitiful pictures on the walls, smashing dishes. One punctured the water pail and, with the dead heat pressing down, thirst became unbearable.

Before the sun showed straight up, Pete was bullet-kissed four times. But the wounds were not serious. In the early afternoon, Jake's curses weakened. Pete saw he was drenched with blood. Once he laid his head on his arms and appeared to sleep. About the time Pete came to believe him dead, the renegade roused and again took up the fight.

The posse, badly used, retired each man to some covert and raked the shack until it was a sieve, threatening to collapse. Yet, miraculously, Pete remained unhurt. To him it seemed like a just payment for his own unwillingness to shed blood. Along toward evening, when the fire from both sides had dwindled to desultory sniping, Jake moaned and fell to coughing blood. A bullet had found his lungs and his fight was done.

"Pete! Pete!" The boy crawled to him, suddenly afraid. Jake gripped his hand, hanging on as if thus to hold himself to this earth. "I'm finished, kid. Got a few shots in me yet, mebby, but I won't last the night out. Soon be dark, button, an' that'll be yore move. Go out the winder an' snake-crawl inter the brush. An' square the account, boy. You savvy? That's the Hangnoose crowd—Gord Burgand an' his gunnies. They've drawed Grimes blood, son, an' you gotta revenge it. Promise you will."

"I promise," Pete murmured, mostly through long habit of implicit obedience to this irascible, hard-drinking man. In him was no burning urge to avenge whatever the Hangnoose posse perpetrated here. Across a long interval of bitterness and abuse, Pete saw again the filmy face of his dead mother—that tired, sad-faced woman who had wilted like a flower before the cutting edge of poverty and the brutality of the man who somehow had made her love and marry him. Pete thought of the manhandlings, the whippings he had undergone for reasons he couldn't understand. Like when Jake found the books given to Pete by a traveling circuit rider, books that had given the boy all he knew of education and better things than rustling and killing. "I promise, Pop," he said again.

"Swear you'll kill Burgand, son, or may God strike you dead!"

"I swear, Pop, or may God strike me dead." It almost choked him, but he got it out. Then he was draining the dregs from the bottom of the bullet-shattered jug, in answer to Jake's croaked demand.

Through the dusk, Pete squinted over the sights of his .45-70, firing and loading and firing again. First from one window, then from the next. Making the rounds, to keep up the illusion that the defenders were alive and full of fight. Jake had expressed the belief he had some fight left in him. But after that last drink, he never got up. For a while he moaned at irregular intervals. Then he fell silent. Just before dark, the boy touched him. He was growing stiff and cold. Dead.

Pete felt loneliness more than grief, fright more than anger. He stripped off his sire's gun and belt and took his place beneath a window at the rear, waiting for the wipeout charge he knew would come with the fall of darkness. The silence he feared most of all, and had the Hangnoose men attacked in silence, the odds would have favored their tacking his pelt to the barn door. Instead, like Indians, they came with a rush, leaping in from all sides, with high, fierce yells on their lips and fire running from the muzzles of their guns.

As the first yell split the star-lit silence, Pete slipped into a black muslin cape formerly used by Jake Grimes to better blend into the night on his forays. Then, clutching Jake's notched gun, he darted through the window and into the open. A ring of steel and flame and hate faced him. Lead whistled past him, spatting against the splintered house wall. In a frenzy of desperation, giving himself up for lost, he bent low and hurled himself in a dive toward the boxed wall of the well.

Pete slid to a stop on his belly, laid his face on his arms and waited for doom to touch him. Men sprinted past him, on

either side, hurling invective and lead at the house. Pete crept around the well box, crawled a hundred feet, rose and raced into the brush. Behind him chorusing yells lifted as the sky reflected the rosy glow of flame. He knew where to find the saddled horse Jake had turned loose, and in a half hour he was on the animal's back. The next evening, gaunt and wary as a half-starved coyote, he returned to the ashes that had been his home and took time to bury the charred thing that had been Jake Grimes.

Knowing no grief for the passing of this man who had given him nothing but abuse, Pete still felt a touch of tenderness as he rolled the grisly relic into the shallow grave he had scooped out, in the damp sand near the well. He owed his father this last simple decency, mainly because he had lied to him—under oath. He could and would not go through with that fool revenge idea. What Burgand had done was what any stockman must do, when human wolves prey upon him and a too thinly spread out law offered no solution.

So a boy buried his father, murmured a muffled "Good-bye, Pop," mounted his animal and rode south toward the Border, twenty-five miles away.

CHAPTER TWO

Pete Grimes—Coyote!

A LONELY boy, spurring his tuckered horse across the wild border near Ojos de Conejos. The desert wastes of Northern Mexico are lonely wastes and vast wastes. Pete Grimes had ridden into them as one rides to any haven of friendship and security from pressing trouble. Dawn caught him in an endless, undulating hell of cactus, ocatilla and catclaw, leading toward a distant promise of purple peaks. He was hungry and thirsty, but food and water were far away. He was weary, so he picketed his pony and lay down in the sand and slept. The plaintive whinnying of the horse woke him, with the afternoon half gone.

The beating sun and dry air had leeched much precious moisture from Pete's body. Well he knew that if he and the horse couldn't find water soon, their bones would whiten on the shifting sands—certainly no better a fate than if he had fallen and burned in the beleaguered cabin with Jake Grimes. He pulled the cinch, mounted and gave the horse free rein. If there was water near, Coaly would take him there.

The animal lit out toward the east, as though he knew where he was going. The certainty of that stride gave the boy hope and he rode with something of a swagger. But after two hours his gnawing hunger and swelling throat made him sick and faint. As the sun went down, he saw birds circling in the sky, far ahead, and told himself there was water there.

Dusk. The first stars glittering. Black night. Maybe he dozed, or maybe he was nearing the end of his endurance. He saw blue lakes, green vistas; he heard the dripping of buckets being lifted from a well, and the sizzling of a steak in a hot skillet. They were pleasant dreams and only terror could rouse him from a complete enjoyment of them. And terror spoke to him from the dimness of the gloom ahead.

"Rein down, *paisano,* till we see are you the man we want!"

Like a man roused from sodden sleep by a bucket of water in the face, Pete came up in the saddle. His blood ran cold. As if its author stood framed in light instead of hidden in darkness, that voice spelled the manhunters of Gord Burgand, and payoff for the sins of his father. Tumultuous thoughts engulfed the boy's mind, and a mighty will to live. His horse was snorting, swerving. Fear was a vast ache in Pete's breast.

"Will you stop, feller, or . . ."

Pete didn't remember jerking the notched gun which had belonged to his father. He didn't recall spurring the horse. But, suddenly, he was slashing ahead—riding at the shadows of horses and men that materialized in the gloom before him. He saw the flash of his gun, heard shrill curses pouring from his own lips. The horse, crazed with fear, shot between the mounts of the night riders, carrying Pete from a scene shrouded in doubt except that there were two empty saddles.

Pete had ridden perhaps a quarter

mile, trembling and shaken, when he heard the voice. "Help! Hulloo!" It didn't come from behind him, but from dead ahead. It was not a voice of craftiness and cruelty, but one edged with awful desperation. Pete rode toward it, holding his reloaded gun level.

"Who is it?" he called finally.

"Rusty Crane. Gimme a hand an' I'll help you down them coyotes. Right now I'm tied to a *sahuaro*."

Warily, Pete came riding in, dismounting before the writhing figure tied to the giant cactus tree. Something warned him to beware of trickery. A stronger something took him straight up to the bound man; he whipped out his Barlow knife and slashed the ropes. A very tall and very slim man straightened, stretched. "Thanks," he muttered. "That's one favor you'll never forget, feller, an' one I'll never forget. What happened out yonder?"

"I—I dunno."

"Cripes!" Rusty's face came close. "You're nothin' but a button," he said slowly. "An' a mighty dry one at that. Let's get yonderly an' see, then we'll drench that thirst of yores an' do some eatin'. I'm starved. Come on."

He struck out. Pete, leading the horse, stumbled over something. It was a human body. He cried out, and Rusty said with terrible emphasis, "Yeah, that's Seven-up Stever, my saddle pardner. Split-ear Menea, our other side pardner, run into the darkness with a bullet in the guts. It was him they was lookin' for when they stopped you. Hell, I don't hear nothin'. You musta hit 'em, kid."

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PETE'S tongue was too thick to waste energy talking. Together, they walked across the flat, drawn by the stomping and shrilling of a frightened horse. And so they found the two bodies. Rusty held a match, swore. "By Judas Priest, you did get 'em both, neat an' purty." As if in a nightmare, Pete had a glimpse of two bearded, ghastly white faces, made more horrible by blood welling from their head wounds. He felt that weak sickness coming over him, knew he was falling. Then strong arms were about him and the tall redhead he had saved was carrying him back toward the spring. "Know just how you feel," he chuckled. "Felt that-away after my first killin'."

There was food at the camp near the spring, and precious water and coffee spiked with whiskey. Rusty lolled by the fire, carelessly indolent now that the renegades who had jumped the camp were dead. He was in faded jumper and levis. A flaming haired, freckled, blunt-featured cowboy who wore an unshakable grin. He studied Pete like he couldn't believe it.

"Ain't even got fuzz on yore face," he muttered, "an' yet you tip over as bad a pair of gunnies as these deserts has knowed—just like stringin' fish." His questing green eyes spotted the notches on Pete's gun. "Five notches, eh? Mebby I made a mistake about why you passed out on me."

"It belonged to my dad," Pete told him. Then, because Rusty was the kind to inspire confidence in youth, Pete began to talk about Jake Grimes, his life and tragic death. He mentioned no names, except that of Gord Burgand. At which Rusty blinked and let a bleakness dull his smile.

They talked quite a while, those two. Stimulated by the boy's confidence, Rusty spoke of the traffic in stolen cattle, wrested from the big, landed *rancheros* and run across the line by renegades—both organized and independent. The bitter struggle between those two types of rustlers had resulted in Rusty being tied up and left for the buzzards after his mates had been slain in a surprise attack.

"And so," he finished, "I lose two good pardners an' woulda lost my taw except for you, kid. Don't know who you are, what you're runnin' from or where you're headin'. But with five notches on your gun, you orta make a good spread of a name like the Cinco Kid. I can put you in a way to make money—more money than you thought there was. How about us bein' pardners, me an' you?"

Those were golden words to the affection-starved, harried youngster. They put a lump in his throat so he couldn't talk, and they put tears in his eyes. But the fervency of his handshake spoke for him, as he bound himself to an obliga-

tion that torture couldn't have shaken him from. Next day they drifted deep into Sonora. One night they came to Hermosilla, where wild music, dark-eyed dancers and desperate gambling thrilled Pete as he and Rusty loitered in a cantina.

It was after midnight when Rusty saw the men he waited for. In a back room, he introduced them to the Cinco Kid—his partner. Gringo Zachary and Silver Snell were utterly unalike, yet they wore identical badges of blackguardism, treachery, deceit, just as Jake Grimes had. Gringo, hulking, beetle-browed, eyed the boy sourly. "How come a half-baked kid for a pardner, Rusty? Robbin' the cradle? Hell, he ain't dry behind the ears."

Rusty laughed. "You'd sing another tune," he said, "if you'd seen him bust loose like a rash an' rub out two gun wolves, purtiest kind. Saved my life." Sparing no superlatives, he told them of the attack on his camp, defeat, hopelessness and then rescue by this youngster with five notches on his gun. They were impressed, Silver clinching it against Gringo's antagonism.

"He'll do for my money," he said, "havin' wrango wrote all over him." He brushed back the white forelock that explained his sobriquet. "Age has got nothin' to do with it. He's a strong kid, plainly with plenty guts an' a way with a gun. Look what Billy the Kid done with them tools."

Thus Pete Grimes, alias the Cinco Kid, became one of the Four Coyotes—independent rustlers dealing in wet cattle and horses and frowned upon by Mexican and United States law, incensed *rancheros* and organized elements turning rustling into huge gain.

CHAPTER THREE

Skunk Scent

THOSE first weeks were, for Pete, exciting, adventurous, instructive days—one after another. Lonely campfires, listening to canny men argue and plan. Learning the rustler business first hand. Then one day there was total agreement to undertake a bold venture, avoiding overworked trails leading south from the Border and riding into the remote and sleepy Altar, where the *rancheros* were, as Silver put it, living in a fool's paradise. It was a stirring, smoky baptism for Pete.

They got a herd together, were discovered and lost the herd in a long running fight. When the chase was abandoned, the Four Coyotes returned and, in a bold counter stroke, took command of the herd again and got away with it. Three weeks after the establishment of their partnership, they circled the cattle in an arid, rocky valley, an hour's travel below the Border. Night was coming in and Silver Snell took his departure. Silver was valuable because of his contacts. The only independent, he boasted, who could sell cattle to the powerful Wet Cattle Syndicate.

Rusty and Gringo and Pete made a camp at the trickle known as Paisano Spring, munched their jerky and tough, dried *tortillas* and talked of what they would eat when they first hit a restaurant. The weary cattle moaned for water and bedded down. They would need no watching, like at first. The mesquite fire burned low. Coyotes jabbered and wailed from a nearby *loma*. Gringo shivered, got up and emptied his gun in their direction. "Shut up, you high-yellin' carrion eaters, or I'll give you somethin' to yell about."

Rusty eyed him through narrowed lids. "You're jumpy, Gringo. What's eatin' on yore gizzard?"

The burly renegade sat down, sulking. "Don't like them critters. They git on my nerves. Anyhow, they say somebody dies whenever they yell that-away."

"Somebody dies everytime an owl hoots," Rusty philosophized. "Every time a bird chirps. Where the's life, the's death. You scairt of it?"

"I ain't scairt of nothin'."

"You sure don't look it," Pete said, sarcastically.

Gringo sulked. Rusty got out a deck of dog-eared cards and he and Pete played seven-up. Along about midnight the ground carried the beat of many hoofs. Rusty stomped out the fire. An owl hooted—the signal. Rusty gave it back. Silver came into the camp with one rider, many others having remained a hundred

yards or so away. When a tiny blaze was built up, Rusty gave Pete the sign to keep in the shadows and advanced to meet the newcomer. He was tall and he was spare; that's about all Pete could tell. For the man was cloaked against the night chill and his face was totally masked. His black, snapping eyes ran up and down Rusty. His heavy voice rumbled.

"Here with my boys to take the cattle," he said. "Silver says the's seven hundred an' sixteen head. I'm takin' your count. If it's off, one way or another, we'll straighten it out next deal. Thirty-five hundred an' eighty dollars, gold. I've got it here. Take my word, or want to count it?"

"How about it, Silver?" Rusty's grin was wider, like he was about to break into laughter. "You satisfied?"

"Plumb."

"Let 'er go as she lays," said Rusty, and took the bag. The man made a gesture of salute, wheeled his pony. He whistled shrilly, and the night echoed to the sudden tumult of hoofs and shouts as the new owners got the sleeping cattle to their feet and started toward the Border. Rusty went to his pony, tightened the cinch and whipped the gold to his cantle.

"What you figgerin' on?" Suspicion rode Gringo hard.

"Takin' this money somewhere else to whack it up," said Rusty. "I was born untrustin' of syndicates."

There was some demurring but no argument. Rusty was determined and he carried out his idea. At dawn, they were ten miles to the east, in a maze of gaunt hills, dry arroyos and mesquite knolls. In this lonely setting, they dismounted, hunkered down with spread scarves. The bag of gold rested between Rusty's knees.

"Eight hundred an' ninety-five dollars apiece," he said. "I'll deal out the coins till I'm down to odds. We'll cut cards for what's over."

"The Kid gets half a share," growled Gringo. "Skip him every other deal."

"Cinco done more work than any of us," Rusty countered coldly. "He taken the same chances an' done his share of the fightin'. We settled this right at first an' there'll be no renegin' now. Share an' share alike."

"I don't care nothin' about the money," the boy said, "if it'll make things run any easier an' smooths out trouble."

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"IT WON'T," Rusty said, his face without its customary smile. He went on counting out the coins, deftly feeding the growing piles of eagles. Now the bag was empty, and Rusty held two coins in his hand. "High card takes twenty dollars," he said, and tossed out the deck. It was Pete's day. He drew the only ace. Silver Snell gave no hint of his feelings, but Gringo's lips twisted hatefully. The eyes of both men were on the boy as Rusty handed him the two extra coins. But they made no move until Pete gathered the corners of his bandanna.

It must have been the signal, for suddenly Gringo and Silver were rearing up, their guns sweeping from their holsters. Rusty let out a yell, "Look out, Kid. It's a snakeblood bath unless—"

"Callin' cards from Gord!" Gringo yelled, and thumbed his hammer. But Rusty was rolling and the slug slapped his dusty shirt as it passed. The redhead's gun came out as he hit the dirt and a half roll put him into firing position. Nor did he give it back to Gringo. Silver's weapon was flashing to its target—the Kid—when Rusty's bullet took him in

The author of this vigorous story, Harry F. Olmsted, knows his Old West—and how to bring it to colorful life—as do few other fiction writers. You'll want to read his smashing novel, "Tornado From Texas," that carries with it all the thrilling action and zestful human flavor of the Frontier—in the current issue of DIME WESTERN! Buy your copy now!

the guts. He never did fire his piece. Gringo, believing Rusty's shot had been meant for him, croaked triumphantly as he threw his gun muzzle down toward the redhead. But he figured without Pete, who, thanks to Rusty's cool judgment, had been given time to draw. Pete's bullet took Gringo in the ear, deflecting as it hit skull bone and actually blasting off the big renegade's jaw. He fell like a plummet.

The smoke blew away and echoes died. A cactus thrush ventured a bit of a song. Rusty got up, that grin on his mouth like a curse. He looked at the white-faced boy and laughed. Maybe it was a laugh of satisfaction, but it had the sound of the Devil's laugh, when hellish work has been done. "You're like me, Kid," he said thickly. "You don't like this sorta business."

"I—I hate it," Pete stammered. "But —but they didn't give us no other choice except dyin', an' I ain't ready to die—yet. Whatever from hell got into 'em?"

"Way back yonder in the Altar," Rusty said, "I got the scent of that pair. There was skunk in it. I kept my eyes an' ears open, wondering why. The answer came just a minute ago. Did you hear what Gringo said, just as he cracked his first cap?"

"What?"

"Callin' cards from Gord! Ever hear tell of a Gord?"

"Yeah?" Pete's mind went back to his dying father, and his own muttered promise to avenge a kinsman in blood. "Yeah, Gord Burgand, boss of the Hangnoose Iron."

"Right," Rusty snapped fiercely. "If Gringo hadn't said that, I'd have figgered him an' Silver was moved by greed. Now I know different. That money was loaned to stage a fake payoff, an' had to be returned to Gord. Gringo an' Silver was workin' for the Hangnoose."

"Why didn't they kill us before?" the boy asked. "They had plenty better chances."

"Mebby not," Rusty countered. "I'm never caught too far off balance, Kid. An' besides, they needed us to help with the cattle till we hit the Border. Mebby them riders that come with the masked feller were set to down us, but that might have stampeded the critters an' you kept plumb outa sight. They figgered the sign wasn't right, which left us for Gringo an' Silver. It taken 'em by surprise when I changed camps before splittin' the money. When we reached for our shares, that was about their last chance to try cuttin' us down, an' they taken it."

"Sounds simple enough when you figger it," Pete said admiringly. "What now?"

"We'll sack up the money again an' bury it at the root of yonder smoke tree. It will come in mighty handy to pay a few overdue bills, one of these days. Afterwards we'll ride."

"Where?" asked Pete, sensing as he had before that there was more to this man than just the grinning, happy-go-lucky puncher he seemed.

"To the Hangnoose, of course," said Rusty, and this time there was a ring of sincerity to his laugh.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hangnoose Riders

PETE'S nerves were tight as a fiddle string as he rode with Rusty, across the drought-scorched range of the Hangnoose outfit. The sun hung like a hot copper plate in the burning Border sky. It was hot, but that wasn't entirely the reason for Pete's sweat. He knew too well the danger of his appearing at Gord Burgand's home place. They had done their best to kill him once and would again. Not that he knew any of them, or they him. But they might; he didn't know. Many times he had seen them come roaring into Palomas, riding the spurs, blasting their six-shooters at the sky and yelling like Apaches. Lording it over everybody else. An arrogant, ornery-natured lot. Always Pete had hated them, just as he feared them now. But not for anything would he let this red-headed pardner of his know he was afraid.

He rode close to Rusty's flanks as they swept through the arch gate, with its ironic hangnoose dangling. As if drawing comfort and courage from that straight-backed stalwart. He wondered what business Rusty had here, but knew

he would be told in the redhead's own good time.

At the end of a cottonwood-lined lane, they came to the accumulated sheds, corrals, house, bunkhouse and barns of a big outfit. It was quite a sight and there was much of interest to Pete, but his eyes were all for the men loitering in the strip of barn shade, near the horse trough. About a dozen of them, they stared as the visitors came to a halt, their faces frozen in studied and unfriendly scrutiny. From the corner of his mouth, Rusty muttered, "Hard customers, Kid, an' clanny as skunks." But his face remained smiling and about him was an aura of vast self-respect.

"Where'll I find Gord Burgand, boys?"

The loiterers neither moved nor spoke. But a voice spoke from the barn entrance: "What you want with him?" A man stepped into the open, his hand very close to his high-belted gun. He was tall and he was spare, and the way he stepped reminded Pete of that night with the Altar cattle, when the tall, masked man had walked into the firelight. This one had the same snapping black eyes and the voice that same snarling quality of arrogance, Pete thought. But if this was the same man, he showed no hint of recognition as he paused, a rod away, to size them up. "What you want with Gord Burgand?"

"Friendly wau-wau," Rusty smiled. "Leadin' up to signin' on with the Hangnoose. You can go a whole lot further an' do worse, now that you're short handed."

"True, mebby, if I was short handed." Burgand's black eyes were busy, as if he sensed something here he couldn't see. "Which I ain't."

"You're shy two good hands," Rusty insisted. "An' here's your chance to pick up two better ones."

Pete caught his breath and stiffened at the redhead's boldness. Gord Burgand tried to keep the certain knowledge of what had happened out of his eyes. His face seemed to grow together, darker and more hard-bitten. "Yeah? Just how have I lost two of my men?"

"They sat in a game with mortal stakes, Burgand, an' come out loser. Surprise an' treachery was all on their side, but they played poor teamwork."

Burgand didn't move, but the black eyes widened, giving Pete a full glimpse into their chill, inhuman depths. "They're dead, huh? Who killed 'em?"

"Me an' the Cinco Kid was the pair they thought was asleep. We're pardners an' we work like a team. But don't feel bad about it. The Kid here has five notches on his gun. An' me—I know where to oil a smokewagon. Losin' Gringo an' Silver is your gain."

Burgand swelled with inner anger. The loiterers near the trough came alive and ready for business. The Hangnoose boss sundered a silence fraught with the menace of armed and dangerous men. "You gulched them boys, by Judas! You shot 'em in the back to get their share!"

"What share?" demanded Rusty, and Pete took courage from the redhead's immeasurable gall. "I'll take you there to prove they was dusted front to back."

Utter silence fell over the yard, broken only by the splash of water in the trough. Burgand's eyes burned. A tremor shook him and Pete braced himself. Then a low chortle broke Burgand's lips and he burst into a roar of laughter, slapping his thigh in delight.

"By Godfrey, you're a reckless devil, Rusty Crane." His speaking the name showed he had known the redhead all the time. "An' a cool headed one too. If Gringo an' Silver couldn't handle the play, with all the edge on their side, I don't want 'em. Shore I can use you two boys." He turned to the crowd, rapping an order. "Sam, take 'em to the bunkhouse an' show 'em the ropes."

"One minute!" Rusty threw a long leg over the cantle and dismounted. "If them two layin' out yonder has any kinfolks here, or friends that hone to take up their cards, I'd admire to get it settled with 'em right now." He stood planted, his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt, eyeing them with that irrepressible smile. They avoided his glance.

Burgand said, "No kinfolks an' no mournin' for the dead on this spread. Get that chip offa yore shoulder an' prove you can make me the kind of man promised. Sixty a month an' found, with hawsses an' ca'tridges, furnished, an' a bonus for gilt edge deals. An' all the power of the Hangnoose behind you if

you hub trouble with the law. Satisfactory?"

"Satisfactory," said Rusty, who only then jerked his head for Pete to dismount. Together they walked down to the bunkhouse with the one called Sam.

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THE Hangnoose crew of some twenty men, never all at the ranch at the same time, proved to be no bargain in sociability. A hard-bitten, bad-mannered lot, they seemed to harbor more than the usual coldness a newcomer runs into on a big ranch. Maybe it was a tribute to their dead companions, Gringo and Silver. Maybe it was just the nature of men whom faithlessness had made bitter and suspicious.

The first job assigned the partners was with three others—driving cattle into the White Mountains, across the piney divide and into the hands of a New Mexico buyer. The same cattle they had taken from Altar *rancheros* and delivered to Burgand at Paisano Spring. It took three weeks. When they returned, Burgand called Rusty and a snarly gun-toter named Spec Magee into his cubby office. When Rusty came out of that conference, he was as grim as Pete had ever seen him.

"I'm goin' off on a job, Kid," he said. "One of them kind a feller never knows whether he'll come back from."

"You mean. . ." Pete gulped, "they're separatin' us?"

"For this job, yeah. Listen close. You're in a den of wolves that wouldn't bat an eye at puttin' a bullet through us both. Keep on your toes at all times. Sleep light an' watch who approaches you after dark. I want you to promise me something."

"Sure, pardner, but why can't I—"

"If I don't come back from this, you quit this outfit, ride plenty miles away—Colorado, Wyoming, California mebby, an' join up with some honest outfit. You're too good a kid to be—"

"Crane!" Gord Burgand's cruel voice fell across the soft darkness. "What in the hell are you doin'?"

"Goodbye, partner." Rusty's hand found Pete's, squeezed hard. "Remember now! If I don't come back, get away from here, fast. They'll gut you like they would a dog."

"You'll come back, pardner," Pete choked.

"If I do," the redhead promised, "I'll have something lined out for us."

"Crane, damn your soul—"

"Comin', boss." Rusty was gone, and Pete felt a dryness in his throat. He could hear the tramp of horses' hoofs and the soft murmur of voices by the corral. Then those hoofs were roaring and Spec Magee's wild, ribald yell was knifing toward the stars. The echoes died away and Pete felt lonely, like bawling. To avoid talking with the smoking men, he crawled into his bunk. It seemed hours and hours later that they came to bed. And Pete tossed, worrying over Rusty, letting his imagination run riot. He longed to wake one of the sleepers and demand to know what sort of business Rusty had been dispatched upon, that he might never return. But they would tell him nothing, he knew that.

More weary next morning than when he had gone to bed, Pete dressed and went to breakfast in the cookshack. It was a silent meal, with the men wolfing the food set out by the Chink cook. There was an oppressiveness here that choked Pete, a sinister shadow that gloomed his spirit. He searched their faces, but they were unreadable. He knew that they, too, were under the same strain, the way they bounced up when the roar of racing hoofs struck in from outside. The shack disgorged them all, Burgand leading. Pete's face went white as death when he saw it was Spec Magee, curbing his jaded horse. His face was smeared with blood from a trickling scalp wound. He staggered and almost went down as he alighted.

Nobody spoke. They waited for his explanation, while he untied a small specie bag from behind the cantle. This he laid in Burgand's hands. "It was a stakeout," he said, sighing wearily. "Like you said, the banker was workin' late. We walked in an' had him cold. I gathered up this an' Rusty was proddin' the old Shylock into the vault when all of Palomas boiled down onto us. We made a run for it, fightin' our way out. Rusty went down before we'd made a hundred

feet. The horses were ready an' I ran for it, a posse on my heels. It's taken me all night to shake 'em." His eyes closed; he sighed and slid into a limp heap at Burgand's feet.

They carried him into the bunkhouse, got the sweat-streaked pony out of sight and then gathered around Spec Magee's bunk. In answer to Pete's hysterical demand, he denied that Rusty was hurt bad, told of seeing two men prodding him toward the jail at pistol point, as he rode to freedom. "I plugged the banker," Spec said. "If he dies, I reckon they'll stretch Rusty's neck to an unpleasant length. Yep, they was sure layin' for us. Somebody tipped 'em off."

Pete felt their studied, scowling scrutiny, knew what they were thinking. "Don't look at me," he said. "Nobody told me what business Rusty was on."

"He couldn't have told you, while I was yellin' for him last night, eh?" sneered Gord Burgand, brooding and watchful. "What was he tellin' you?"

"Goodbye," the boy snapped. "He had a hunch his number was comin' up."

"Yeah?" Burgand laughed tauntingly. "Makes a good story anyhow. Well, I got a different idea. If it turns out to be true, I'll turn Rusty's number up—tonight."

"Nice outfit." Pete's lips curled and a fierce recklessness was on him. "You, Burgand, you swore to throw the power of the Hangnoose behind a man if he hooked law trouble. Now that Rusty—an' you ain't got as good a man in the outfit—has got throwed in jail, you talk about rubbin' him out. Fine outfit an' a hell of a boss." He hitched up his gunbelt. "Well, I'll make good for the outfit. I'm headin' down to get Rusty loose."

Burgand's grin seemed honest enough. "Steady, Kid. No use going off half-cocked. Come on, le's set in the sun an' all plan this out. I want to be where I can see that Sheriff Skin Morris comin'—if he's picked up Spec's trail." He threw a placating arm about the angry boy's shoulder, turned him toward the door. His wink flashed over Pete's head and an ugly-visaged renegade sporting the name of Bittercreek Garson stepped in, warping his gunbarrel between Pete's horns. Flame flared in the Kid's brain. All the starch went out of his legs and he was falling. He wasn't unconscious, but all coordination and power of resistance were gone.

Strong arms caught him before he fell and Burgand was carrying him. Pete heard Bittercreek snarl, "I tell you, boss, that's Jake Grimes' whelp. He musta got away from us that night. If it was me, I'd hang him high."

"Shore you would," Burgand sneered. "An' forever lose what small chance we've got of findin' where that money's hid. No, we'll put him in the wellhouse, where he'll be on ice till we need him for the sweatin'. The important thing now is to make a play like we was aimin' to take Rusty outa the clink. Which will only be a cover-up for our real play at the bank. This is cleanup for me, an' I'm overlookin' nary a bet."

A chain rattled. A padlock clicked open and Pete felt the chill of the rock coolhouse strike into him. Burgand laid him down and left, the lock clicking shut behind him.

Through narrow air vents, high up, his voice came to Pete. "Baldy, you'll ride past the Palomas jail an' throw lead through the window. They'll take after you, the sheriff leadin', I hope. Orry, you an' Dab take places in Skeleton Canyon, with rifles. Wipe out whoever's follerin' Baldy as he leads 'em past. Grizzly, you'll stay here an' look after Spec an' the outfit. The rest of you boys will foller me . . . . to the Palomas Bank, with that box of dynamite. Rig yore tops."

Pete's brain was crystal clear. He heard it all and he smarted. But for some minutes, he couldn't move. Then he stirred, as blood began to seep into his shocked body. Youth recovers quickly, and inside ten minutes the Kid was on his feet, shaky it is true, yet eagerly testing his prison for weak points. Sometime later he groaned and sat down. There was no weak point. He was holding his head, mourning for Rusty, when the rumble of the departing renegades came up from the ground he sat on. And then Pete was on his feet, breathing hard. Somebody, something had rattled the chain. Somebody was fitting a key into the padlock.

CHAPTER FIVE

Notches Earned

PETE, figuring it was Bittercreek returning, gathered himself to fight. The door creaked open. "Cinco! Comin' alive yet?" It was Grizzly Price—an easy-natured old timer hired to haul hay, mend fence and putter.

"I want out of here," Pete gritted.

The oldster caught him. "Steady, button. That's the idea. Rusty's my *amigo* an' I'm sendin' you to warn him. Gord's aimin' to rub Rusty out before he quits town, to square for Gringo an' Silver. Take my horse, yonder. Hit over Applejack Mountain an' you'll beat Gord to town. Here's yore gun."

Pete didn't waste a second. Waiting only to shake Grizzly's hand and to verify the saddle carbine, he tore into the night. He'd hunted Applejack Mountain, knew its steep trails, sheer scarps and treacherous slides. Recklessness on a dark trail would be fatal for him. Delay would be fatal for Rusty. It was a hard gamble but, when he was out of earshot from the ranch, he reined north, to flank Applejack. The road was good and the horse chain lightning. Through the drowsing night he sped to haunt Orry and Dab, at the death trap set for the sheriff. Alone he could accomplish little. By saving Sheriff Skin Morris and his men they might together bag the whole Burgand Gang—and save Rusty.

Applejack marched southward. The moon rose in the Gap. The pony sped him over the divide. Where the slant broke sharply, Pete halted, puzzled. How could he find Orry and Dab in the mazes of those four mile rims? The answer came as he eyed his task—the tiny flare of a lighted match; a cigarette puffed alight, and hardly a half mile away. Pete chose his ground, rode half way and walked the rest, gripping his carbine.

Now he sprawled, resting the weapon over a boulder, aiming at the two gloom-hidden bushwhackers. Lying there, he heard Baldy coming long before he entered the gulch. Later, as Baldy neared, Pete caught the distant thunder of the posse, following fast. Now Baldy was opposite, and his mates hailed him from the rim. "Nice goin', Baldy. How many on yore tail?"

" 'Bout a dozen, on the half shell." A laugh sounded. "They go down easier if you salt 'em." He flashed past and the posse neared. Pete notched his sights, telling himself these were skunks, not men. Now the two shadows moved. Moonlight ran along a double shotgun barrel. That meant buckshot! Nary a posseman would escape that rain of slugs, unless. . . .

"Orry!" Pete called softly. "Dab!"

Pete saw the shadows spin about, through his buckhorn sight. "Who said that? Who's there?" Pete answered, "Cinco!" and took out trigger slack. His carbine blared. One of the killers screamed, pitched backward, his shrilling washed out in the rattle of talus stones. The other shadow compressed, lowered. Pete levered, dropped muzzle and fired again and ducked. Buckshot peppered his covert. A man, gunless and unfeeling, stumbled into the moonlight, moaning and pitching to earth.

Pete was up then, racing for the rim. The posse milled below and a voice demanded, "Who done that shootin'? What's up?"

Never showing himself, Pete hollered, "Pete Grimes yodlin'. Lissen, Sheriff. Tollin' you up here was a trick of Gord Burgand. Right now he's lootin' Palomas an' figgerin' to blast Rusty Crane, my partner—helpless behind bars. Hit for town—quick!"

He turned about, running. Behind him that heavy voice rose insistently. "Hey, Pete, you young fool. Come back here. Rusty. . . ." Pete didn't hear the rest. Out of breath, he found his pony and spurred toward Palomas. . . .

Pete was two miles short of his goal when the muffled *boom* of dynamite rolled across the flats. Terror-stricken for Rusty, he drew blood with his rowels, calling on his jaded pony for more. The beast fell, dipping down into the creek. The Kid soared, rolled and came up running. He splashed across the creek, raced up the bank and into the outskirts of Palomas—aflame now with the sudden fury of battle. The spilling passion of gunplay seemed far removed from the jail, and Pete knew a warming gratitude

when he saw the darkened stone building rear before him.

He popped inside, calling quaveringly, "Rusty, pardner. You asleep?" He knew better, but the place screamed emptiness and Pete was scared. No answer, and the Kid stifled a whimper. He said bitterly, "They've took you out, pardner, to gut you like a dog. But I'll square for yuh, damn 'em!" He raced to the front porch, sizing up a street laced with lead, where an outraged town blasted at the despoilers of their bank.

The Kid hardly knew what to do. As he pondered, he thought of cruel Jake Grimes, his dead sire. He heard those weak, broken words again: *"Swear you'll kill Burgand, son, or may God strike you dead."* The words seemed to come from the alley behind, and something floated through the moonlight—like a wisp of gunsmoke, or a mote in the eye. Pete followed that grisly hunch, his back crawling. *"They've drawed Grimes blood, son; you've gotta revenge it."*

Turning into the alley, Pete saw the muzzle bursts up ahead, knew the bank was surrounded. Blasting echoes were ending Gord Burgand's renegade reign. But Rusty was gone . . . gone. Pete paused, with firing townsmen just ahead and a quavering Apache yell sheering through the turmoil. From the rear of the bank tumbled the shooting Hangnoose renegades, with Burgand bellowing, "Every gunnie save hisself. Kill all yuh can. Give Palomas a funeral it'll long remember." Gunfire strengthened as they came leaping.

Transfixed, Pete saw the ranks of those desperate outlaws thinned as they neared him. He saw Palomas men rear up, shooting, only to be blasted aside. Pete shrank back against Kincaid's Pioneer Saloon, striving to locate Burgand. Failing that, he stepped before them, blasting lead. Gun flame blinded him. A shoulder crashed into him, putting him down. A flashing gun barrel grazed his skull. Boots pounded over him. Shaken, hurt, Pete rolled to his knees. Lead shrieked down the alley, so he crawled through the saloon door, left gaping by the panicked outlaws.

Beyond the threshold, in total blackness, Pete's questing fingers encountered a body, warm but lax. Dead. Skirting it, the Kid crawled on, his gun held before him, until he came to the darkened barroom, reeking now with odors of beer and stale tobacco. Liquor gurgled and a bottle smashed against the wall. A hoarse voice said, "All right, you lead slingin' sons. Out the front, blastin' as you go."

The floor shivered as they rushed outside, firing. The blast of guns lifted again, and the hate-filled cries of men. Pete rose to tumble after them, but was held in his tracks by something behind the bar. A match flared there, and there was a queer intermittent winking of that flare. Somebody was behind that counter, hunkered low as he lighted a smoke.

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PRESENTLY Pete could smell the sweet pungency of cigar smoke and a grim curiosity seized him. In his detestation, it was easy to picture Burgand letting his men brave the bullets of the townsmen, while he lay doggo, awaiting his chance to slip out unobserved. Now the Kid backed to the wall and silently edged along it, an inch at a time, until he reached the corner, behind the open end of the bar. Now the smoke smell was stronger and he could see the faint glow of the cigar coal, without in the slightest being able to make out details of the smoker. And so he waited, his gun leveled at that glow. Waiting for the hiding man to reveal himself.

On the street gunfire waned and died and the town echoed to the sudden turmoil of man talk. Outlaw rule had met its death and now the men of Palomas were probing and searching out those who had escaped their fire. Boots echoed on the walk in front. Boots sounded on the threshold at the rear. A voice said, "He led 'em through here, boys, an' he may have been hit. We may find him layin' or we may find him—oh, oh, who's this?"

That was Rusty's voice and Pete bit down hard on his lip to keep from crying out. Rusty, searching for Burgand. He must have broken away from the renegades. A match flared in the back room, where Pete had found the body. Somebody said, "That ain't Gord," and the

match beam moved toward the barroom door.

"Careful, boys. Drop that match, feller, till we make mighty sure Burgand ain't layin' for us." That was Rusty again, no doubt of it. The light failed and unseen men were feeling their way into the dark barroom. Pete heard the hidden smoker stir, saw the quickening of the cigar coal as he rapped off the ash.

Rusty said, "I've got a feelin' that coyote's in here, boys. Just a hunch. All of you pull out. I'm going to get some kind of light here, then we'll see what we see. This night's work's a frost if we lose Burgand."

Funny words from Rusty, and Pete was trying to make sense out of them when a sudden hissing flare illuminated the face of the smoker. The flare came from a short length of fuse, fixed in a stick of dynamite. Burgand's gaunt, ochre-skinned face stood out starkly for an instant, wrinkled with malignant hate. He stood up, his arm flashing back for the cast that would destroy Rusty and the rest. Pete had only to tip his gun muzzle a fraction. "Damn you, Burgand!" he screamed. "I'm pluggin' you!" He fired. The Hangnoose boss and his sizzling fuse fell into the alley behind the bar. Then the Kid hurled himself prone as bullets chunked into the wall around him, bullets fired by those he was trying to help.

"Down, Rusty!" he screamed. "Down, pardner! It's powder about to bust!"

Not about to bust, but blasting with a roar that bowed the walls, shook down ceiling plaster and tore at Pete's senses. The backbar toppled with a crash and smash of glass. All windows were kicked out. A chandelier fell. For a few minutes, Pete didn't reason very well. Then, miraculously, there was a light. Men were crowding in, praising him. And Rusty was there, unharmed, smiling with a strange new pride, his strong arms holding Pete close.

"Thank God I didn't plug you, when I answered yore shot, button," the redhead said fervently. "Naturally I supposed you was shootin' at me, when really you was savin' my life an' those of the other boys with me. An' it's Burgand, kid. You hear me? You got him an' you'll take down the bounty offered for the boss of the Wet Cattle Syndicate. It's all done, boy. My job's done. Nothin' left to do now but look up those we stole that herd from an' pay out that money, which they'll be glad to get."

Pete didn't answer at once. His mind was too full of wonder for words. His fingers toyed with the little eagle badge on Rusty's shirt front—the badge of the deputy U. S. Marshal. "You're the law," he murmured finally. "Funny, ain't it, the Cinco Kid bustin' his neck to save a lawman, so's he can get throwed in jail."

"Don't worry about jail," the marshal laughed. "All the time, you've been my deputy, though you didn't know it. Best helper I've ever had. Too good a hand to be wasted in some renegade band. . . . or in jail. That's why I had Ol' Grizzly sign on with the Hangnoose, in case things went bad for you. We'll not bust up our teamwork now."

"That's what I tried to tell the young fool," the sheriff muttered. He had come in too late for the fun. "But he went from there before I could say my piece. Sudden Pete, I'll say."

And so the Cinco Kid kept his promise to his dying sire, saved the big redhead who had shown him his first kindness, earned the name of Sudden Pete Grimes which was to stick and swapped to a law horse in the middle of his outlaw career. And folks around Palomas will still tell you that he stands as a living refutation of that "like father, like son" saw the wise gazaybos rave about.

THE END

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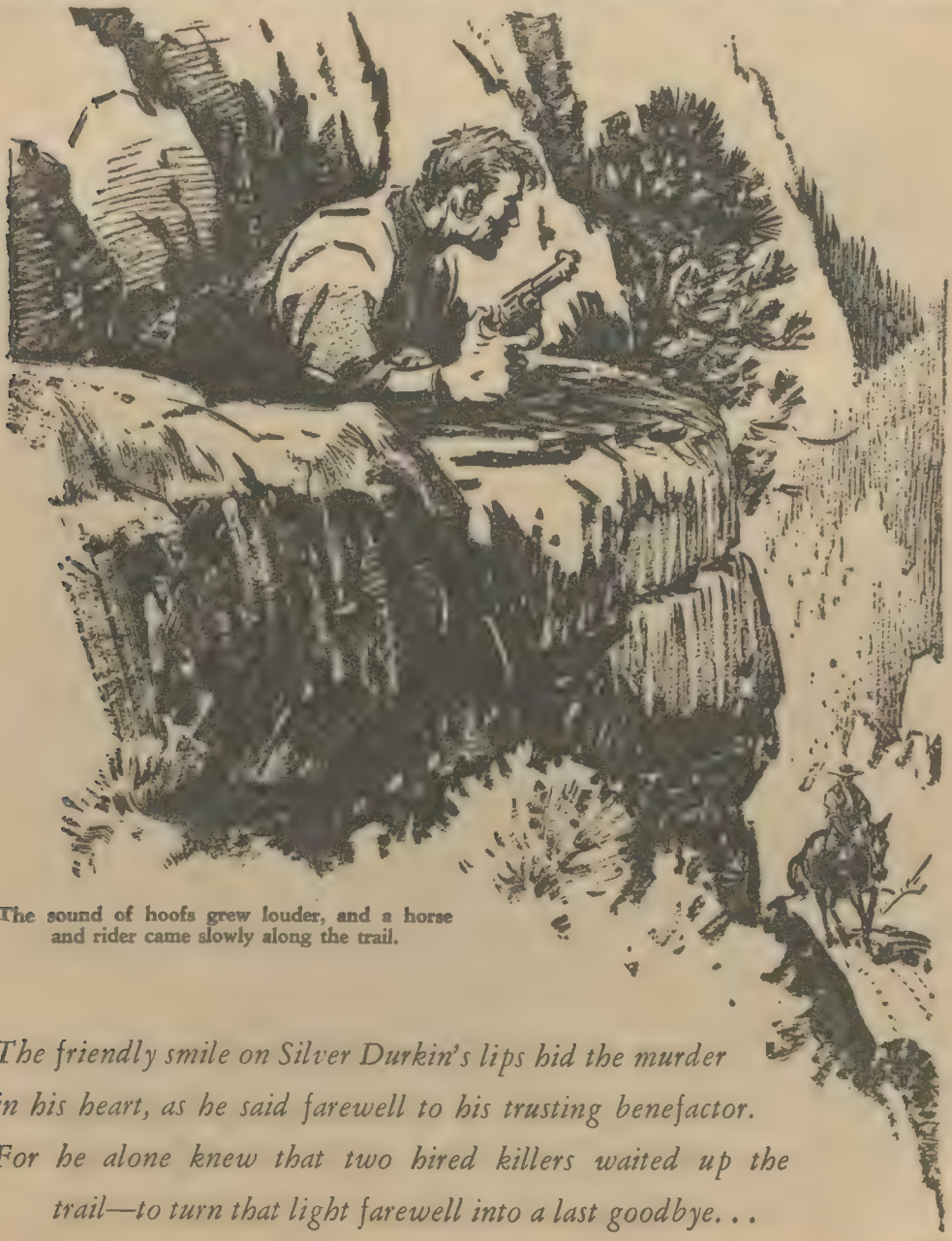
Satan Picks A Saddlemate

By GUNNISON STEELE

THE three—Silver Durkin, Hachita Joe and Chalk Eye—had met in the back room of a Silverpeak honkatonk to renew old acquaintances . . . and to plan a murder. Silver Durkin was big, handsome, resplendently dressed, with hair the color of raw gold. The outtrail's brand was plain on the hard faces of Hachita Joe and Chalk Eye.

"We don't get it," Chalk Eye said.



The sound of hoofs grew louder, and a horse and rider came slowly along the trail.

The friendly smile on Silver Durkin's lips hid the murder in his heart, as he said farewell to his trusting benefactor. For he alone knew that two hired killers waited up the trail—to turn that light farewell into a last goodbye. . .

"This Bill Kabe is your side-kick. And you want him killed?"

"That's right," Durkin said calmly, turning a whiskey glass in his slim, smooth fingers. "He's my side-kick—and I want him killed. He's worth more to me that way. If you boys don't want the job . . ."

"We want it! We just don't savvy the play, that's all. From what we hear, this Bill Kabe thinks you're a swell gent; he'd do anything in the world for you. You're safe from the law there at Kabe's ranch. All that might be changed if Kabe died."

Silver Durkin was quiet a moment, looking into his empty glass. Bill Kabe's dying *would* change things. But not in the way Chalk Eye meant. Durkin was firmly enough entrenched on the Silverpeak range so he would be beyond suspicion. Bill Kabe was responsible for that. Folks figured that anybody Bill Kabe stood behind was bound to be square and honest.

Actually, nobody knew much about Silver Durkin, not even Bill Kabe. They knew that there was crushing strength in his lithe, graceful body, and magic gun-speed in his slim hands. That was about all, for Silver Durkin didn't talk about his past, where he'd come from or what he'd done. But when lanky, homely Bill Kabe had put his stamp of approval on Durkin that had been sufficient.

That suited Silver Durkin fine. For he had been an outlaw in former years, riding the dark trails with Hachita Joe and Chalk Eye. Then, one day, they'd ridden into a gun-blazing trap in a cowtown a hundred miles north of Silverpeak. They'd had to separate. And now, after three years, they had met again. . . .

"So you want to know what the pay-off is?" Silver Durkin said softly. "All right, here it is. You remember, after breaking out of that gun-trap up at Ute Springs, we agreed to meet a month later at a certain place? Well, I couldn't make it. I got into another jam, got shot all to hell. But, somehow, I got away again. For six days and nights I rode and crawled and dodged, with enough lead in me to kill a bull. Finally, after covering a hundred miles, I tumbled off my bronc.

"Bill Kabe found me, and took me to his ranch. He nursed me back to health, keeping his mouth shut, not telling anybody how he'd found me out in the badlands shot to pieces. By the time I was well enough to ride again, I knew I had found me a gravy train. Bill Kabe didn't have any folks; he was lonesome, wanted me to stay on at the Rolling R with him. He's a trusting, honest, hard-working gent, and thinks most other folks are the same. So I stayed, keeping my eyes open and my mouth shut.

"And because Bill Kabe thinks I'm a swell gent, lots of other folks think it, too. They drink with me, ask me into their homes, ask my advice about a hell of a lot of things."

Hachita Joe shook his massive head, puzzlement on his dark, cruel features and in his sooty eyes. "Bill Kabe done all them things for you—and you want him killed!"

Silver Durkin nodded, smiled. "You boys know I never did let friendship stand in the way of business. Bill Kabe has got a sweet little outfit. He's built it up till it's ready to start making big money. Today we made a big shipment of cattle east. After paying up all his bills, except one, he had five thousand dollars left. He left four thousand in the bank, has a thousand in his pocket. That thousand he owes to old Sam Ericson, who owns the Bar Y outfit, joining the Rolling R on the north. Kabe borrowed the money from Ericson a year ago to buy some blooded stock. Sam Ericson likes to be paid off in cash, so Bill Kabe will take the thousand home with him tonight, and tomorrow he'll ride over and pay Sam Ericson off."

Chalk Eye was a thin, bald gent, with one brown eye and the other chalk-colored. He grinned. "You want that thousand dollars—is that it?"

Durkin said contemptuously, "If that was all, I'd kill him myself, and take it. Anyway, if I wanted a thousand dollars, I could just ask for it and Bill Kabe would give it to me. Didn't I say he thinks a lot of me? So much so that, a month ago, he had a will made out, signed and witnessed, stating that in case Bill Kabe dies, the Rolling R and everything on it goes to Silver Durkin. And that, my cut-throat friends, is the payoff."

"Slick," Chalk Eye grinned and looked at Hachita Joe.

LOW-VOICED, cold blue eyes still staring into his empty glass, Silver Durkin murmured, "In five years I'll be the biggest cowman on this range. I'll have money, power, respect, everything a man could want. You boys do like I say, and maybe I'll cut you in. Everything's got to look just right. I can't afford to have anybody even suspect that I had anything to do with Bill Kabe's death."

"We sabe. What you want us to do?"

"Bill Kabe is in town now. But he's not one for drinking and hell-raising. In just a little while he'll head for home. But I won't go with him. I'll tell him I aim to stay in town a while and play some poker. Five miles from the Rolling R, the trail forks; one prong goes on past Sam Ericson's place, the other to the Rolling R—and stops there. So it's a cinch that Bill Kabe will be alone after he passes the fork. A couple of miles beyond the fork the trail crosses a stream. Always, Bill Kabe stops there and lets his bronc drink. That would be a good place for Kabe to have an accident."

"About our pay—"

"You two get the thousand Kabe will have on him," Silver Durkin said. "Take it, and get out of the country as fast as you can. And be sure to leave sign along the river to show that *two* men waylaid Kabe and killed and robbed him. You got everything straight?"

"Bueno!"

"Then head for the river, and wait till Bill Kabe comes along. I'll wait a couple of hours after he leaves, then head out that way myself. I'll be the one to find Bill Kabe. I'll raise plenty of hell, and swear to get the skunks that bushwhacked him, and get mushy when he's buried. Then I'll take over Bill Kabe's outfit."

"You allus did have brains, Silver," Chalk Eye said admiringly. "You're too smart for these brushpoppers!"

Silver Durkin nodded, said, "You jaspers go out the back way when you leave," and strode out.

He went along a corridor and into the barroom. Men spoke to him respectfully, slapped him on the shoulder, asked him to drink with them. He returned their banter, his brown, handsome face pleasant in the murky light.

A pretty girl, wearing a low-cut dress and a scarlet rose in her raven hair, smiled invitingly up at him and begged him to dance. Silver Durkin hugged her with a big arm and kissed her lightly, then moved on toward the batwings.

He went along the street, an arrogant swing to his big body. He drew the cool, sage-spiced air into his lungs, and smiled softly in the shadows. He turned in at another saloon, a place much quieter and less crowded than the one he had just left. There he treaded his way toward the back of the room, where three men sat at a table with glasses before them. Two of the men were Tolley and Carse, prominent cattlemen in the valley. The third was Bill Kabe.

Whereas Durkin was handsome and dashing, Bill Kabe was raw-boned, awkward-looking, homely as sin. Bill's eyes lighted as he saw Silver Durkin. Carse and Tolley nodded respectfully to the newcomer.

"Have a drink, Silver," Bill said. "I was just tellin' these gents how you've helped me build the Rolling R up. Next year we'll clean up big. Then we'll start spreadin' out."

Durkin smiled, sloshed whiskey into a glass. They talked a while, about cattle prices and range conditions. Even big men like Carse and Tolley respected Silver Durkin's judgment. Carse ordered more drinks, and impatience seethed inside Durkin. It seemed like hours before Bill Kabe looked down at his big silver watch.

"Nearly time for me to bed down," Kabe said. "You ready to ride along, Silver?"

Silver Durkin grinned. "Not me, pard. I aim to circulate, and maybe play me some poker. You go ahead when you get ready."

"Then I'll line out." Bill Kabe talked a few minutes longer, then walked out into the night.

Carse said, very slowly. "There goes a *man!*"

Silver Durkin drank again with the ranchers, then started circulating. He visited several saloons, and for an hour sat in a stud game. It was almost midnight when he saddled his horse and rode out of town.

THE river made a low, stealthy sound in the night, and the croaking of the frogs seemed loud to Hachita Joe and Chalk Eye. A thin, disc-like moon rode the sky.

Here, just before reaching the shallow stream, the trail dipped between broken yellow walls. Hachita Joe and Chalk Eye crouched on a rock ledge thirty feet above the trail. They'd been there a long time, waiting for Bill Kabe to appear. They'd brought along a quart of whiskey, and that had helped. Now the whiskey was almost gone.

"A thousand dollars," Chalk Eye muttered. "But it's Silver that gets the gravy, like he allus did."

Hachita Joe stirred in the shadows. "It's Silver that's got the brains, ain't it? Gimme that bottle!"

The squat killer sucked at the empty bottle, swore disgustedly and flung it aside. It clattered loudly on the rocks. Startled by the noise, the killers froze, sat very still for several minutes. But they heard nothing.

On the trail out from town, they'd hidden in thickets twice and watched riders go by. But that was before they'd come to the fork in the trail. This left-hand fork, Silver Durkin had said, led only to the Rolling R. So when they heard the low thud of hoofs a while later, they knew it must be Bill Kabe at last.

Hachita Joe stirred, and the rifle in his hand clicked.

Chalk Eye muttered, "You better let 'im have it, Hachita—I can't seem to see good."

"We'll *both* let 'im have it!" Hachita Joe growled. "Get ready!"

The sound of hoofs grew louder, and a horse and rider came slowly along the trail toward them. The pale moonlight was deflected by the walls, throwing the trail in deep shadows, blurring the oncoming rider. But they could see well enough to shoot. They could see that the rider was tall, and hunched forward in the saddle as if he was looking for something.

"Now!" Hachita Joe whispered, and his rifle roared, spat out a red streamer of lead-fanged powderflame. Chalk Eye's pistol hammered out two flat, crashing blasts. The rider stiffened, tumbled to the trail, while his mount whirled and galloped back along the trail.

"Got 'im!" Chalk Eye said shrilly. "You go down and get the money offa that gent, Hachita, while I get the broncs!"

They'd left their horses in a break in the walls a hundred yards from the river. As Chalk Eye led the horses onto the trail, he saw Hachita Joe running to meet him. Hachita Joe leaped into the saddle and went pounding along the trail. They'd ridden a quarter-mile before Chalk Eye came up with his partner. Hachita Joe looked pale, his eyes wide-staring.

"Did you get it?" Chalk Eye said.

The squat killer shook his head. He seemed dazed.

"Why? Didn't he have it? Did Silver double-cross us?"

Hachita Joe said, "I didn't look for any money!"

"Why didn't you?" Chalk Eye yelled. "You gone crazy?"

"This jasper we shot, when I got to him he wasn't quite dead," Hachita Joe explained hoarsely. "I got a good look at him, and he said, *'You damn, murderin' snakes, you shot the wrong man!'* Then he flopped back and died."

Chalk Eye swore incredulously. "You mean—"

"Yeah," Hachita Joe said slowly. "That gent we killed was Silver Durkin. . . ."

At the Rolling R, Bill Kabe finished graining his buckskin and went toward the ranchhouse. It was good to be home. And it was good to have the feeling of freedom that being out of debt brought. It had been a mental tussle, there at the forks of the trail.

Bill grinned. "Now I'm danged glad I decided to ride by old Sam Ericson's place, wake him up and pay him that thousand dollars I owed him, instead of waitin' till mornin'. I'll sleep better tonight."

Starting into the house, he paused and stood listening. Seemed like he'd heard gunshots off toward the river. But now the night was serene, with a cool wind whispering across the prairie and a pale moon riding the sky. Bill Kabe grinned again, and went on into the house.

RANGER, DRIFTER —GRAVE-MAKER!

By MILES PIERSON

When a Tascosa judge gave him a double sawbuck to deliver a tiny box, Poverty Juggins, drifting Ranger, didn't know it was a down payment on two graves.

THE First National Bank was robbed in San Antonio, and Poverty Joe Juggins showed up in Tascosa a hundred and fifty miles away. He wasn't exactly on the trail of the robber-murderers who had killed the bank president before rifling the vaults, but he didn't think he was far behind them.

His hand, which an eye couldn't have followed, had his sixgun leveled across his left arm before he'd finished speaking.

From a second-story window of the Mercantile Mart, which was Tascosa's only two-story building, two men watched Poverty Joe drift aimlessly into town. They studied him as his jughead roan moved listlessly up the baking hot street. Little spurts of white dust rose from beneath the roan's hoofs at each step, and the loungers beneath wooden awnings and the stray dogs curled up along the board walks were too soaked with the heat of this Border town to even look at the stranger.

But the two men behind the dingy curtains of Judge Clarke's office were bright-eyed with excitement. One was Judge Clarke himself, and though it was a hot day, he still wore his flowered vest, high stock and black Prince Albert coat. The other man was Pinch Evans. It was entirely too warm for the galling weight of guns, but he wore two big Colt .45s on his flat hips. Otherwise he had on the old clothes that any down-at-the-heel rancher might wear.

Pinch Evans' face was brown, narrow and ugly. His long nose was hooked. It seemed to meet his upper lip when he smiled, and he was smiling now.

"Jedge," he said, "I knew some drifter'd come along. That hombre looks wuss off than me, and I got half of fifty thousand stached where even I cain't hardly find it."

"Don't say things like that!" Judge Peak Clarke whispered. His ragged breathing made his full lips puff in and out. "You'll get us hung before we can spend that money!"

Pinch Evans grinned. It made his ugly face even uglier. "But not before we settle a pussonal debt of yours and get ourselves a nice hunk of border rancho, huh?"

"Pinch," the judge's voice was pleading, "I wish you wouldn't talk that way. Damn it, man, our luck has been good so far—"

"And gettin' better, Peak." Pinch Evans gestured with a slim-fingered hand at the fly-specked window.

Judge Clarke leaned forward in his swivel chair to get a better look at the stranger drifting along the street below their window.

There was nothing about Poverty Joe Juggins that might make any man suspect him of carrying a Texas Ranger badge hooked inside his boot top. He wore wrinkled levis, dusty from travel. His footwear was ready-made, and the long-shanked spurs on his heels were plain. He had on a faded blue shirt that showed a faint salt rime from the sweat that had stained it during the day. His old hat rested precariously on the back of his touseled sandy hair. A single Colt rode his right leg, and half the cartridge loops in his old belt were empty.

"Ain't even got enough dinero to keep his belt full," Pinch Evans grunted. "He's our man, Peak, sure as shootin'."

Judge Clarke's plump shoulders squirmed. "Quit talking about shooting! Damn it, man, can't you see I'm looking that fellow over? The chore we're aimin' to give him is important. Yes, mighty important!"

"Dyin' usually is." Pinch Evans continued to smile. He seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

The judge put his scrutiny back on Poverty Joe's face. The drifter didn't look like much more than a kid, although he was likely twenty-five. His nose was straight, and so was his mouth. He had a hard chin, and there wasn't an excess ounce of flesh on his face. Likely he hadn't been eating any too regularly.. He looked to be about five-eight, and he was compactly put together. Right now he rode with a weary slouch, and his head kind of bobbed to the roan's gait. Nothing much seemed to be bothering him, but that was the way with the drifting kind.

"Yes, you're right, Pinch," the judge said explosively. "He'll be our cookie. Look, he's swinging down in front of the Oasis. Let's us stroll over there."

"And take him a green ticket to hell," Pinch Evans chuckled.

"Quit talking that way!" Judge Clarke's fat shoulders shivered. "Damn it, man . . . ."

◇ ◇ ◇

POVERTY JOE looped reins over the hitch rail and stamped across the boardwalk. His spurs jingled. The batwing doors of The Oasis squeaked shrilly when he pushed them open.

At the sound a fat barkeep with his head pillowed on the pine counter jerked upright. He almost tipped off the stool on which he was sitting. "Damn that door!" he said peevishly. "Some day I'll oil them hinges!"

Poverty moved through the cool duskiness of the thick-walled adobe room. The darkness felt good against his eyeballs, stung with dust and sun. "Better leave 'em be," he grinned. "If they didn't squeak you wouldn't know when customers walk in."

"Don't have enough to keep me awake," the barkeep grunted. "You want a shot?"

"Beer's better. I allus feel like a bloated shoat after I drink the stuff, but it tastes good goin' down."

The batwings squawked again. Two men came stamping inside, and Poverty studied them in the unwashed mirror behind the backbar. One of them looked like somebody trying to appear important. Any gent who was a somebody around Tascosa wouldn't have to wear a stiff collar and tie on a day like this.

The other fellow was different now. He was taller than his friend, and a whole lot thinner. His clothes didn't amount to much, but the guns on his hips were low slung, and tied down. He looked like a lobo wolf and he walked with the same prowling gait. Poverty searched his mind, trying to remember if he'd ever seen that thin, ugly face on a reward poster, and decided he hadn't.

"Howdy, Judge!" The barkeep grabbed a towel and polished the bar where Peak Clarke was about to set his elbows. Then he glanced at Evans. "Figured you was still in Coahuilla, trying to locate that herd them damn Border-hoppers run off yore place."

"Got back yistiddy," Poverty heard the man called Pinch drawl. "No luck."

Evidently the judge was quite a personage around Tascosa, at that. The barkeep hadn't wiped off the pine counter for his elbows. Poverty reflected.

Peak Clarke put his round paunch against the bar next to the Ranger. He laid a bulging letter case that had shiny brass latches at the corners and a locked centerpiece beside his elbow. Then he gestured at Poverty's beer.

"Have that one on us, stranger. It's good to see new faces in Tascosa. Yes, it is!"

Poverty's eyes were a curious, amber-flecked green. Judge Clarke didn't particularly like them. However, there was a sprinkling of freckles beneath the grime and stubble that covered the drifter's face and that was a good sign. Freckle-faced men were usually easy-going, and not too smart.

"Thanks," Poverty nodded. "Was kind of wondering just how I'd pay for my thirst."

The judge smiled expansively. He looked much like a pink-cheeked, overfat baby. "Don't worry about that, my boy," he chuckled. "The house always sets up the fourth! However, we aren't introduced yet, are we? I always like to know the names of men I drink with."

"Juggins," Poverty said. "Folks usually get to calling me Poverty Joe wherever I stop off, on account of I cain't seem to keep a nickel in my pocket."

Clarke chuckled. "I'm Judge Peak Clarke. This is Pinch Evans. Has a ranch over on the border."

"Won't have it long," Evans said sourly, "unless them damned greasers quit running my cattle across the Rio!" He tipped the drink the barkeep had poured. "How?" he suggested.

Poverty drank with them. He wondered if word of the robbery had got this far yet, and he wondered just why these two hombres were so friendly. Folks like the judge and this Tascosa lobo looked like the kind who wanted a return on their money.

He drained his beer, and the barkeep set up another round.

"Mine this time," Evans drawled. The man had one of the coolest voices Poverty Joe had ever heard. Yes, these two Tascosans were interesting hombres.

"Any jobs runnin' loose around here?" the Ranger asked idly.

The judge started to shake his head, then he appeared to reconsider as his eye fell on the fat leather case beside his elbow. "Why, now, come to think of it, Juggins, mebbe you could do a chore for me. Fact is, it might work out two ways, for you. Yes, sir."

Poverty Joe raised his sandy eyebrows.

He looked like a homely bland-faced devil. These hombres were fast! "How so?" he asked without too much apparent interest.

"Why, it's this way," Judge Clarke explained. "I've got important papers here for a gentleman named Sandoval. Dan Sandoval. He owns the El Centro Rancho, the biggest spread along this strip of the border. I'm getting too old to ride fifteen miles in this hell-fire heat, but if you're interested, I'll pay you twenty dollars to deliver this letter case to him. It'll give you a nice opening to brace him for a job."

Poverty Joe Juggins had always figured that he had a fair poker face, and he was hoping that it had worked all right at mention of Dan Sandoval's name. Sandoval was the chief reason for his being here in Tascosa. The rancher was the one possible link between a dead bank president and fifty thousand dollars in new bills that had vanished from the vaults of the San Antonio National.

In fact, there was even some suspicion in Santone law circles that old Dan Sandoval might have had a hand in the robbery. It was known that the rancher had called on President McClellan, seeking a loan, and that it had been refused him. Some men might figure that was enough motive for a man to return after office hours, when nobody was in the bank but the president, working late, and take what he had wanted to borrow.

The trouble was, McClellan had been murdered, and dead men had a bad habit of not talking. So there was no way to identify the killers. All the Rangers of the sheriff's office knew was that two men had done the job. Boot tracks in the banker's office showed as much. The sheriff had asked Captain Jamison of the Rangers to send a man to Tascosa to pick up Sandoval, and Poverty Joe had managed to get himself the job, after talking it over with his superior.

"Capt'n," Poverty had said earnestly, "my dad and old Dan were partners in this country, back in the days when gents lost their hair if they slept with both eyes shut. I don't recollect ever havin' seen ol' Dan but once, when I was a shaver, but the gent I remember wouldn't rob no bank, and I'll prove it, if you give me the chance!"

HIS Captain's answer had been to hand Poverty a list of the serial numbers of the missing money. "Those killers went somewhere," he said grimly. "And if we're lucky they won't know that the bank had a list of the greenbacks they stole. If they headed for Coahuilla some of the dinero might turn up in Tascosa. I hope so."

Poverty Joe hoped so, too. Laying hands on those bank robbers would go a long way toward realizing an ambition in the back of his mind for a long time. The San Antonio National, through its board of directors, had offered a ten thousand dollar reward for capture of the killers and return of the stolen money. Ten thousand that would buy and stock a small ranch for Poverty Joe Juggins.

All those thoughts passed through his mind in the space of a minute as he appeared to be studying Judge Clarke's offer. Finally he blinked, and still with that placid, almost stupid look on his face, he nodded.

"Why, Jedge," Poverty drawled, "you-all just about flabbergast me. Dunno as how I could make any easier dinero. Shore, I'll deliver your package. Right this afternoon, by gosh! How far did you say 'twas to the El Centro?"

Judge Peak Clarke beamed, and gestured for another round. "Set 'em up, Tubb," he said, then added, "Why, Juggins, you can't miss the way. Take the wagon road that leads south from town, and keep going toward the Ocatilla Hills. Sandoval's place sets in a cup of said hills. He's got a nice place, but rustlers have been whittling at his herds until he's about busted."

Pinch Evans, on the other side of Clarke, was moodily twiddling with his empty whiskey glass. "Something has got tuh be done about them raiders," he grumbled.

"They're organized," Tubb, the bartender put in conversationally. "I've even heard it talked that they got a white man boss. If somebody could nail his hide to a post, we'd have no more trouble, and folks like ol' Dan Sandoval could git loans when they need 'em."

Poverty wasn't paying much attention to the talk. His eyes were reflectively watching Pinch Evans' long, slender fin-

gers. The man's hands were mighty smooth for a gent who made a living swinging a lass rope out in the brasada.

"Well, I've had my daily stint," Judge Clarke said hastily. "Now, if you're ready, young man, I'll pay you off, and you can be on your way."

"Yes, sir," Poverty said soberly. "I'll be right glad to oblige you, judge, but seems like twenty dollars is a lot of money for deliverin' a little package like this."

"Not at all, my boy, not at all!" Judge Clarke beamed. "Here," his hand came from a side pocket with a twenty-dollar gold piece in it.

Poverty Joe eyed the double eagle, and his expression turned doleful. "Ain't very big to be worth so much," he said plaintively. "Coins that size always slip through my fingers. Only thing I can keep is bills. You got any paper?"

"Why, of course," the judge chuckled. He seemed to be well-heeled with money. This time his hand came from a hip pocket with a fat wallet. He drew four five dollar bills from it.

Poverty didn't even look at them. Nothing smaller than tens had been taken from the Santone National. He stuffed the money carelessly into the pocket of his levis, and gave the pair a pleasant grin.

"Leastways, I'll eat for a while, even if this Mister Sandoval don't need any hands. Gents, I bid you adios."

"Oh, Juggins," the judge warned, "that dispatch case is locked. I expect it to remain so, until you put it into Mr. Sandoval's hands."

Poverty Joe's lean cheeks started to glow with color. "Fella," he said softly, "if you think I'm going to bust locks and pry at other folks' business, you can have this and your damned twenty back again!"

"No," the judge raised his fat hands. "No, no. Hell, no, man! You go right along."

◇ ◇ ◇

JUDGE PEAK CLARKE had made no mention of seeing him again, Poverty Joe reflected as he headed toward the Ocatilla Hills dancing in the

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heat haze ahead. That seemed a little funny. Like maybe Clarke wasn't expecting him to come back to Tascosa.

The road kept stretching over hummocks of sage-covered plain. The jughead roan jogged tirelessly. Poverty relaxed in his saddle. The small, locked case which he had tied to the saddle bows in front of him kept bumping against his leg.

"Those hombres," he told the jughead's ears, "sure come after me quick when I hit town. Almost like mebbe they were waitin' for some stranger to drift in. Funny."

A banner of dust rising to meet the sundown glow over the Ocatilla Hills caught Poverty's attention. He topped a rise and watched a rider on a paint pony come loping down the road toward him. The rider brandished something that looked suspiciously like a Winchester.

Poverty kept jogging forward.

The Winchester was real. It's report jolted the silence. Poverty halted his jughead. That bullet had gone over his head without many inches to spare. He raised his right hand promptly, then just as promptly he used his left to yank off his Stetson. The rider was a girl, and a doggoned pretty one at that. She was wearing a doeskin riding skirt, and a white blouse with a little green tie at the throat.

With her rifle pointing steadfastly at his middle, the girl reined her paint to a halt. Her eyes were brown, and there was grim inquiry in them. Her lips were a red, uncompromising line across her face.

"Ma'am," Poverty told the girl gravely, "put that danged thing away. I don't like to look at 'em!"

"What are you doing out here?" She had barely voiced the question when Poverty saw her eyes start to widen. "Why, you've found it!" she exclaimed. "Dad's letter case—"

Poverty blinked. No one had told him Dan Sandoval had a pretty, brown-eyed daughter. He wished suddenly that he was anything but a Ranger. "Ma'am," he managed to say, "this here thing was given me in Tascosa by a gent calling hisself Judge Peak Clarke. He handed me twenty dollars to deliver it to the El Centro."

The girl's eyes snapped. "I don't won-

der. He knows better than to come near dad himself. The last time he came out trying to buy our place my father chased him off the premises with a horsewhip. What I'm wondering is why he's returning dad's file case? My father said he'd lost it, or someone stole it from his saddle, when he was in San Antonio. Let's see—" She started to crowd her paint close alongside the jughead.

Poverty nudged his horse way from her. "Now, ma'am," he expostulated, "I told Clarke I'd put this in your dad's hands, and by gosh I'm goin' to do it. Boot that 'chester, and ride along with me to your rancho if you don't believe me."

The girl's small, firm chin hardened. "I'll ride right behind you, mister, and don't worry about my rifle!"

Poverty sighed. He moved out ahead. He had never found it much use to argue with women—particularly when they were angry and had a gun in their hands. He wondered as he jogged along the road just why she had been waiting out there. It looked almost as though she had been expecting him or somebody else. If she had been expecting a man to arrive with this letter case, it would look like a frame-up. The thought made Poverty Joe feel a little sick.

Then he asked a question that made him feel a lot better. "Ma'am," he called across his shoulder, "you answer me one question, and I won't ask no more."

He saw a quiver that was almost a smile loosen the girl's lips. Poverty Joe had never stopped to think about it, but horses, dogs, and stray cats took a fancy to him on sight. So did most folks, particularly women. He had a helpless look about him that appealed to their maternal instinct. Molly Sandoval was finding it increasingly hard to view this lanky, tousle-headed cowpoke with suspicion.

"What do you want to know?" she queried.

"Why were you settin' out along this road with a 'chester in your lap?"

"We're short-handed," the girl said promptly. "That old tight-fisted devil, McClellan, in San Antonio, wouldn't loan dad enough money to hire men to protect the cattle we've got left. My job has

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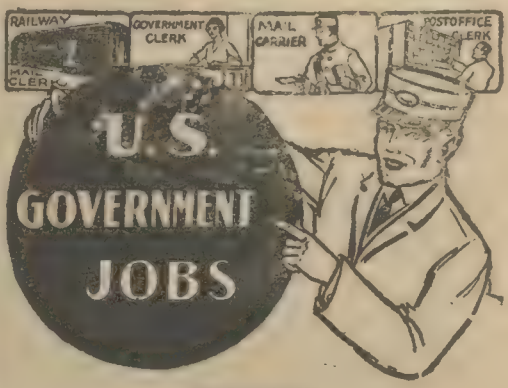

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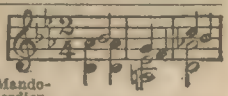

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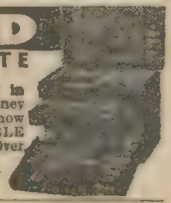

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been to see that no strangers reach the ranchhouse."

Poverty blinked at the girl and his eyes weren't stupid any longer. "Don't suppose you know," he drawled, "that McClellan won't be lendin' anybody money again. He's daid—and your dad was the last man to see him alive!"

The girl swayed and almost dropped her rifle. "You— Dad— I— He didn't tell me. Oh, he couldn't have known! When McClellan refused him he got mad and left town right away."

"And mebbe he could have turned right back again." Poverty Joe's face looked like chiseled flint suddenly. "The National was robbed at the tail end of the same afternoon yore dad saw its president. So—"

"You," the girl's face was the same hue as her shirt now. "Who are you?"

Poverty Joe had managed some unpleasant chores in his time. This was one of them. "I'm a Ranger," he said, and his hand, which an eye couldn't have followed, had his sixgun leveled across his left arm before he'd finished speaking. "We're goin' on in now, and have a talk with your dad. You can believe me or not, but I come here to prove that he didn't have nothin' to do with that holdup. Now you slide that 'chester into the boot where it belongs, and come up alongside me."

Like someone moving in a dream, the girl obeyed. Poverty watched her, and he felt terrible.

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DURING the remainder of their silent ride to the rancho, he tried to put things together without much success. When they rode into the yard in front of the sprawling adobe ranchhouse he still felt like a man trying to braid too many strands into a rope.

Darkness had come as they rode the last few miles. Now lights were glowing cheerfully inside the house.

"Come on in," the girl's voice sounded as though the last spark in her was dead.

She sounded like she knew her father was guilty, Poverty thought. She didn't seem to believe that he had come to

prove something different. With the letter case Judge Clarke had given him in his hand, Poverty followed the girl to the low veranda.

She opened a door that led into a huge, low-ceiled room. A man with a great mane of white hair and wide shoulders that age had not treated lightly, turned from stoking a huge stone fireplace directly opposite the door. The poker he held in his hand was more like a three-foot iron spear than anything else.

"Dad," Molly Sandoval said, and she tried to make her voice gay, "I've got two surprises for you. Judge Clarke must have found your letter case. He sent this gentleman to return it. The joke would probably be on the judge if he knew it, but this man is a Ranger sent here under cover to have a talk."

Dan Sandoval reached up to grasp the log mantel above the fireplace. His face was old, too, leathery and lined with years of vast living.

"Robbed?" he said. "The National?" Sudden laughter moved his shoulders. "By God, that serves McClellan right!"

It was an answer Poverty hadn't expected, and yet it did more to reinforce his belief in Sandoval's innocence than words of false surprise could have done.

"McClellan was murdered." Those were the first words Joe had spoken since entering the house.

Their utterance stopped Sandoval's deep chuckle. "Dead?" he said. "Now that's another horse!" His eyes were the same fiery brown as his daughter's. He peered more closely at the gangling, seedy-looking Ranger. "If McClellan was killed, and his bank robbed, what are you doing here, young feller? When I was a member of your outfit, we hunted down those kind of whelps instead of spending our time riding around the country!" He thrust his head still farther forward. "Ain't I seen you before?" he asked.

Poverty laid the letter case on the brown oak center table. "Some folks claim I look a leetle like my dad. You ever remember tellin' a younker stories about scalpin' so many Injuns you had 'em tanned and made into shirts?"

"Sam Juggins' boy!" Dan Sandoval roared. "Glory be and highwater. Hell,

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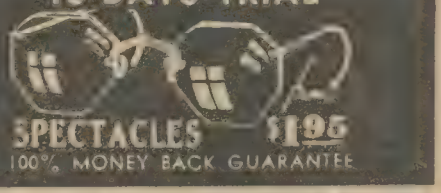

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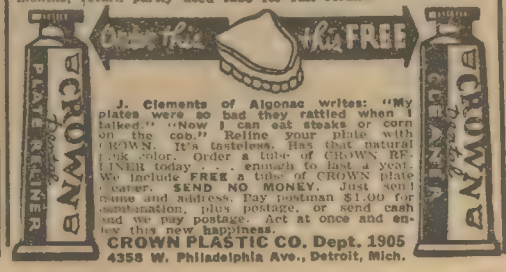

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son, you're the spittin' image of your dad at his age. He was a rip-roarin' whiskey-swillin' tiger in them days—and so was I."

"Dan'l," Poverty said in quieter tones after they had shaken hands, "I had me an idea afore I left Santone that I didn't even tell the Capt'n. Got it when they started wondering about you. It 'peared to me then, that mebbe somebody from Tascosa who didn't like you mighta known you were going to see McClellan. They might even have figured out that you would be a suspect if somethin' happened to him. I was thinkin' a while ago that I'm like a gent tryin' to braid too many strands into a rope. A lot of things seem to fit into this picture. If some hombre around these parts could lay that robbery on you, it'd leave him scot free and clear, and make him a ten thousand reward besides."

Molly Sandoval had been a close listener. "Clarke," she breathed. "He's hated dad ever since he campaigned against him in the last election and cost him his judgeship."

"Pussy-foot Peak!" Dan Sandoval growled. "He's been trying to buy me out for the last six months, but I'm damned if I know where he'd get the money."

"I know where he might get it." Poverty had always found that he talked better when he moved around. His steps took him to the fireplace. He picked up the poker Sandoval had been using, and looked at it. "He mighta got it from rustlin' yore beef and other fellas. Bartenders have a habit of hearin' things they shouldn't and then blabbin'. Fella named Tubb said he'd heard talk that the greaser bunch hoppin' the Rio have got a gringo boss. Peak quit drinkin' mighty sudden after Tubb said that! Now you take this compadre of his. Clarke said he was a rancher—"

"You mean Pinch Evans? Nope, son, that's the wrong tree. Evans has got a spread, all right, and he's been hit harder than most of us. He's spent more time than a little tryin' to trail them gents."

"You ever rode with him?"

"No," Sandoval said slowly.

"This guy, Pinch, has got mighty smooth hands for a brushpopper," Poverty said thoughtfully, "and from what

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"Go on," Sandoval said.

◇ ◇ ◇

POVERTY moved his shoulders, and hit one boot with the long poker. "Them two gents hardly give me time to belly up to a Tascosa bar before they were at my elbow. Most of the folks on the street were too danged heat-struck to even lift a head when I rode by. But, and I'll lay you another blue chip, them two hombres were watchin' from some winder, just hopin' a pore bedraggled cowpoke like me would drift into town. Twenty dollars is a heap of money to pay a gent to ride fifteen miles. That's what the jedge gave me to bring your letter case home."

"Mebbe we'll find out about that, too," Dan Sandoval was growling as he took a silver key from his watch chain. "This thing warn't locked when it was stole, but it is now. We'll see—"

The flap came open with a little snap.

"Good God Amighty!" Sandoval said.

The tip of the poker in Poverty's hands grated across the flagstoned hearth. He stepped to the end of the table, and his fingers were frozen about the iron rod.

There was no need to check the list of serial numbers tucked into a compartment of his money belt. A part of the bank

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money lay there on Dan Sandoval's table. The bills were still packaged. It made them easy to count.

"Ten thousand dollars!" Molly Sandoval's hands were shaking.

"It could," Poverty Joe said, and he didn't realize that his voice was harsh, "be your cut. Only it ain't! It's just the amount of the reward money the bank's offering and the boys who sent you this present will figure on getting it back—and your rancho besides."

"How—" Sandoval began.

Poverty shrugged almost wearily. "Me," he said, "I've been thinkin' of settling down, and I was hoping I might collect this ten thousand."

"There's a piece of El Centro Rancho for you for less than that!" Dan Sandoval snapped. "And now that we got the deadwood on them two rustlin' and killin' gents, what's to keep you from collecting?"

For the space of a second Poverty didn't answer. He had seen lamplight from overhead gleam on steel at one of the swing windows opening on the porch. His lips were silent, but his eyes were busy trying to flash Molly Sandoval a warning to step out of line with that window. But the girl didn't understand.

Poverty drew a breath. He had to keep talking. The front door was inching open. Neither Sandoval nor his daughter were in position to see the panel pushing inward.

"You can't collect," Joe answered Sandoval, "on a green ticket to hell! I know now why our friends the jedge and Pinch Evans were so all-fired anxious to lay their hands on some drifting waddy. They needed a man to die alongside you, on account of two robbed the bank. It ain't hard, Dan, to pin crime on dead men."

Poverty moved then with an unexpectedness that the gun-guard at the window couldn't anticipate. The man had evidently seen that long poker in the Ranger's hand and figured he could never drop it and clear a Colt before death took him. However, he likewise had probably never figured that poker might make a first class weapon.

It left the Ranger's hand like a black streak, aimed at the aperture between

door and wall. Pale muzzle flame lashed from the window, but Poverty was following the poker in a long dive. He heard the sodden impact of steel into something soft beyond that opening door, and a scream rending enough to drown the sound of gunfire answered. A body threshed out there on the dark porch.

Poverty felt the burn of lead across his shoulders before he reached the door, and he didn't give a damn. He had a gun in his fist now, and he knew that he'd face cool-voiced Pinch Evans once he was outside. A man ready to kill or be killed.

He went through the door with a twisting, sidelong lunge, and muzzle flame blasted at him. Evans' lanky, cat-like body was outlined behind its light.

Poverty felt shock run through his shoulder. He shifted his gun and thumbed the hammer. Once, and a second time, aiming low. The Santone National needed that fifty thousand back again, and a dead man couldn't tell where it was hidden.

He saw his lead bend Evans backward. "Why, damn you," the man's voice was still cool, "no Ranger can kill me! How did I know you were a Ranger? Hell, friend, you wanted paper money instead of gold. Only a man on the lookout for marked bills would ask for that. So there's your answer, damned law-dog. . ."

His voice trailed off, and in the darkness his body crashed to the floor. He was breathing, though. Poverty could hear the man's ragged in-take of breath.

He struck a match and tossed it from him. Evans' black guns lay beyond the man's fingers. Behind him, where Judge Peak Clarke's fancy vest glowed palely against the darkness there was no sound of breathing. Something black and long sagged from the middle of the judge's shirt. The sight made Poverty feel a little sick. He didn't want to see any more.

Thinking that, he moved back inside, and caught Sandoval at the door. "It's over," he said quietly. "The rustlin', too, I figger. Mebbe now I might do some thinking about that offer you made me. Them green tickets to hell the jedge handed me might turn into grass afore we know it."

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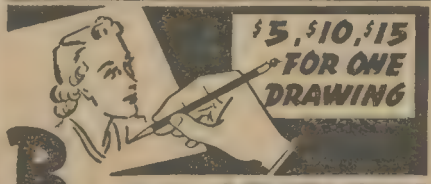

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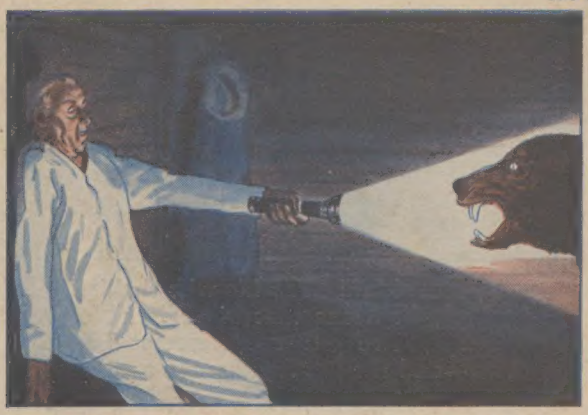
1 **"A TERRIFIC CRASH** startled me right out of bed one night as I slept in the cook house of the mining camp where I work," writes Mr. McIlwraith. "Half awake, I rushed into the kitchen to investigate—and found a huge bear had broken in and was tearing into our food supplies.

2 **"MADDENED** by my interruption and savage from hunger, the great creature started for me. My only thought was to get away from him—*and fast*—as these big cinnamons can be bad medicine in close quarters. I darted back into my room. Then to my horror I realized that the bedroom windows were too small for me to get through.



3 **"IN A NIGHTMARE** of panic, I broke out in a cold sweat. Then I remembered my flashlight. Desperately, I grabbed it from a shelf, whirled and flashed it full in the bear's face. He stopped short. Baffled growls came from his dripping jaws . . . and he turned and lumbered out of the shack. It's my hunch that I was one step from being mincemeat when I picked up that 'Eveready' flashlight with its dependable *fresh* DATED batteries.

(Signed) R. S. McIlwraith"

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